NF

ISSUE #55: LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

AXIOM VERGE 2

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

YS IX: MONSTRUM NOX

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

MARIO PART SUPERSTAR

CHARACTER PROF **RIDLEY**

SHADOWVERS CHAMPION'S BAT

FATAL FRAME MAIDEN OF BLACK WATER

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB PLUS!

WORLD'S END CLUB

NEO: **THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU**

OCTOBER 2021

SUBSCRIBE TO GOOD VIBES GAMING!

IN A WORLD that assaults each of us with negativity on a daily basis, it's comforting to have a place of respite – a place built on a foundation of good vibes!

Good Vibes Gaming is a YouTube refuge. Co-founded by veteran video creators Derrick Bitner, Ash Paulsen and Steve Bowling, GVG is a community that I've personally been so impressed to see grow over the course of the last year. It's really established itself as a home base for a group of like-minded video game fans to come together regularly, relax, chat about games and recover from whatever troubles might have brought them down earlier in the day.

The channel's Today's News Tonight show is the regular rallying point, as every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening at 7:00 p.m. Eastern, Derrick, Ash and Steve all come together (often alongside a different guest star sitting in the fourth position), and they all discuss the newest video game industry news while also chatting with fans in the live audience. Newest GVG team member Brandon Miracle just launched Good Vibes Arcade as a way to stream games while engaging with the fans as well, and in-between all the livestreams you'll also get reviews of new releases, previews, retrospectives, roundtable discussions and more! So check out GVG. I think you'll like their vibe! **– LUCAS**

YouTube.com/GVGOfficial

P.S. Check out the archived Episode 134 of Today's News Tonight – I got invited to be the guest star that night!

ISSUE #55:
LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

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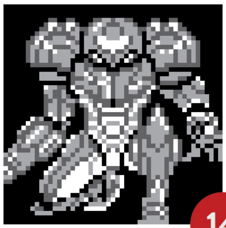

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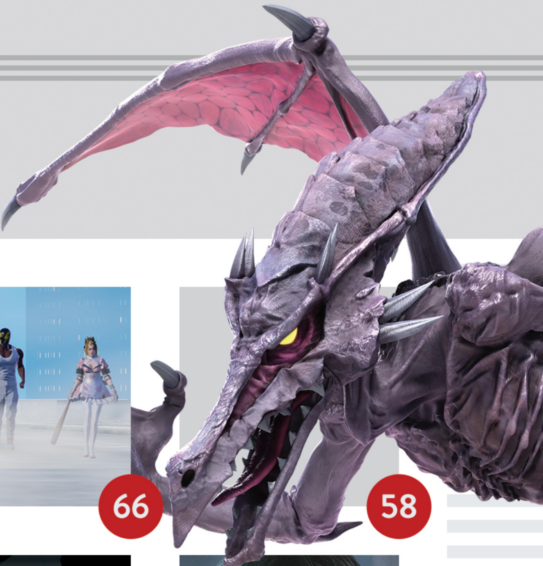

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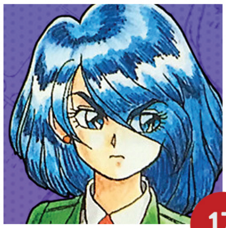

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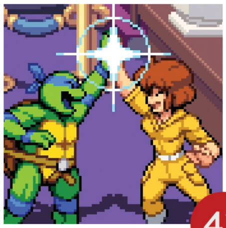

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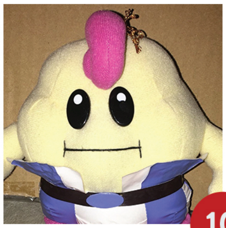

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ON THE COVER

What a joy to be able to give the NF cover art spotlight to Samus Aran for the second time! Metroid's fans are long-suffering, having had to endure exceptionally long waits between sequels over the whole 35-year lifespan of the series. But Metroid Dread is arriving just four years after Metroid: Samus Returns, so it really hasn't been as long of a wait as usual this time around! As always, Samus appears poised and ready to face whatever comes her way . . . but she needs to watch out for the shadows of hidden foes in the distance!

INBOX

THE END OF THE METROID STORY?

Samus has returned to the cover of our magazine for the first time since Samus Returns, and this time we're shining the spotlight on her time spent in the shadows!

Back when we published NF #29 in 2017, headlined by Metroid: Samus Returns for the 3DS, we brought to all of you fine readers a full History of Metroid feature to bring everyone back up to speed with the many previous adventures of Samus Aran. It's still relevant to revisit now, so I encourage you all to do so! It paints a picture of how the Metroid series has grown and evolved over time, mostly focusing on the gameplay of each installment. 2D adventures. 3D first-person shooter quests. A pinball game! Reading about what came before for any brand always helps get you in the right headspace to experience any new sequel.

Since we already covered those bases, though, we wanted to take a different approach in this edition. One of the most curious things about the upcoming Metroid Dread is that Nintendo claims it will serve as a conclusion to the mainline Metroid series story. It's Metroid 5 – and they're saying there's never going to be a Metroid 6.

Wrestling with that reality is a whole ordeal in and of itself, so in this NF issue we're looking back on the Metroid saga once more, but specifically the path we've taken to arrive at this supposed finale. We're revisiting Samus' character and her story so far – and then we're looking to the potential futures that may exist for a brand that's just been declared to be reaching a critical end point.

The dread of Samus' uncertain future is surely creeping in by this point! And we'll keep that feeling of fear afloat elsewhere in this October edition too, with coverage of other spooky games full of creepy creatures! (Maybe don't read this NF issue in a dark room!)

Lucas M Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #54:
SEPTEMBER 2021

We're back again – and so soon! While we usually stick to a strict bi-monthly print production cycle, the chance to interview the truly legendary Kevin Eastman and the overall coolness of the upcoming Shredder's Revenge convinced us to make separate issues for September and October. We'll still have to wait a while for the return of the TMNT (the game slipped to 2022 just after we went to press!), but you don't have to wait for the return of the Metroid series! Last time, we asked if you've played the previous "mainline" Metroid games (1, II, Super, Fusion). We asked if you were aware of the long development history of Dread leading up to its wildly surprising reveal. And finally, in honor of Dread's new E.M.M.I. enemies, we asked for you to share stories of the scariest foes you've ever fled from in games! Here's what you had to say:

LETTERS

Currently I have played Metroid and Super Metroid, but I'm going to try to play the others before Metroid Dread comes out.

Yes, I was aware of Metroid Dread, and I'm very glad it's finally coming out after all this time!

The scariest foe? Probably Wilbur in Shantae: Half-Genie Hero!

And the answer for the game Carter is referring to when he says "Ultimate Challenge" is Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle! **– GREYSON HEIT**

Correct!

The scariest thing I've ever run from in a video game are the terribly fast, one-hit kill beams that shot from the sides of the screen as you tried to scramble every downward in Quick Man's stage in Mega Man 2! You didn't want to waste your precious Time Stopper (or were too young to realize you need to farm for weapon-replenishing power-ups!), so you had to meticulously and quickly dash down as fast as you could! I lost many a Man to merciless beams!

I do remember the title Metroid Dread being bounced around many moons ago, so it was pretty wild to see it alive and apparently well after thinking it was just the stuff of myths and legends.

I've been a fan of Metroid since my parents gave me a copy of the original the Christmas that it came out based on box art alone! I'm glad they did because it not only became one of my favorite series of all time, but was one of those influences that kept me glued to video games for the rest of my life! I love to keep up with the world surrounding Samus and the lore that comes with it (even Federation Force!) and am excited and surprised to see the "end" of a 30+ year story! **– MATT MASON**

Hi, these answers are from Sullivan Herrity (age 6) and his Dad, Alex.

1. Scariest foe we've run away from is a Golden Lynel in Breath of the Wild.
2. Yes we've followed Metroid Dread!
3. Yes, Dad has played all of them, and Sullivan has been catching up on Nintendo Switch Online's SNES and NES games. **– SULLIVAN AND ALEX**

When I think of scary foes in video games, three sinister scoundrels come to mind. Endermen from Minecraft, because they can teleport and run really fast and kill you instantly. Mother Brain (Final Form) from Super Metroid, because you think that you've beaten the game and she just comes out in her cyborg suit looking like a horror/sci-fi B-movie villain from the '50s or '70s. I was scared of the thing, but I kept my courage and beat Super Metroid! But the one that scares me the most is Dead Hand from Ocarina of Time, because it grabs you with its disembodied hands and you see its soulless face and then it tries to bite your face off! Talk about terrifying!!! Redeads and Majora's Wrath were both scary, but Dead Hand makes them look like Tingle.

I had heard about Metroid Dread before the E3 reveal. I first saw the name when I played Metroid Prime 3 and saw the clever tease that Retro Studios did. I was confused, so I looked

it up and heard all about the rumors and leaks concerning Metroid Dread and wanted to see it come true very much. So when it was announced at E3 I was shocked and so SO happy!!! I really want this game and I hope I get it when it launches!!!

I have played all three Metroid Primes on my Wii through the Trilogy Collection during quarantine, and just two weeks ago I beat Super Metroid on my Switch. I wanted to play a 2D Metroid game before Dread and I loved it!!! I would love to play the GBA games, Samus Returns and Metroid Prime 4. (Whenever it comes out, LOL!)

I love your magazine and it reminds me of the good old Nintendo Power days. I have almost every issue and have hung a lot of your posters in my basement which I have converted into a hangout room where I play Switch with my friends! (My favorite posters are Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door and Super Mario Galaxy, two of my favorite games of all time!!!)

Keep making the Playing with Power magic never die!!! **– YOUR 13-YEAR-OLD NINTENDO SUPERFAN, SAM GILVARRY**

The scariest enemy I have ever run from was definitely Mr. X from Resident Evil 2. I had no idea what I was in for! There weren't a lot of guides and other info readily available when that game out like there are today. So when I saw that guy, I was so scared, I shut my console off!

I wasn't aware of the long development history of Metroid Dread. I have been patiently awaiting Metroid Prime 4, however! So now, I have not one, but two Metroid games to prepare for!

I have been a HUGE GameCube fan since my high school days of the early 2000s. So I have played the Prime games. I have also played Metroid for NES. I'm going to explore the Game Boy Advance and the DS Metroid entries to prepare for Metroid Dread!

Love the 'zine and the community, NF! Keep 'em coming and I'll keep subscribing! Cheers! **– ARTHUR HINKLE**

As a pretty big Metroid fan, I was always aware of Metroid Dread as that cancelled fifth game that we almost got for the DS and resigned myself to accepting that the 2D series ended with Fusion. When Samus Returns came out, I was not only overjoyed to see a remake of my favorite Metroid game (Metroid II: Return of Samus for the Game Boy), but I was also very optimistic about the possibility of getting that fabled fifth game one day if Samus Returns sold well enough!

I'm really happy to hear that fans are checking out the series ahead of Dread's release, and personally I've played every mainline 2D game and love them all! The original NES game and its GBA remake are both stellar, but I have a real soft spot for Metroid II because of the fond memories I have of drawing maps for it and exploring every nook and cranny of SR388 whilst soaking in the ambient beeps and bloops (and that awesome "Surface of SR388" music!). Super Metroid is realistically an improvement on that second game in every way, but my opinion is seriously swayed by nostalgia; the map for Super always blows me away with how much variety there is in every new area, but wall-jumping was a really annoying gameplay mechanic! Fusion has a lot of scares and horror elements that I dig. Who can forget SA-X's definitely-not-terrifying face? **– SUYASH KUMAR**

I've had plenty of "run from big monster" events, but my scariest experience was Xenoblade Chronicles X. It wasn't one enemy, but ALL OF THEM. The planet of Mira was filled with horrific monsters, and all wanted blood. You had to take every precaution when exploring. I really learned how to run for my life because you could never let your guard down (even in the lowest level areas). If it wasn't a massive boss, there were plenty of hordes of small enemies ready to rip you to shreds. Either could appear out of nowhere! One in particular was a giant bug that hid as a plant, ready to pounce. I would just manage to escape it, only to run into another. Even when fully maxed out and in your Skell (mech suit), there were still plenty of giants ready to ruin your day. The world of XBCX was a truly scary and hostile one, and there was always something out there that could eat you. **– BEN W.**

Honestly the scariest foe I've run from was one of the Star Wars enemies in Disney Infinity. (I was young, but still, LOL.)

I'd never heard of Dread before it was announced – but seeing how others reacted (I'm probably too young to understand how amazing it must feel for those people though), I can tell it's a big deal for the community and Nintendo fans. I'm psyched and hope this is how I get into the series for real this time.

The only Metroid games I've played have been the original, Super, and Samus Returns. I've always wanted to play Fusion and Zero Mission but they aren't available for any systems I have. **– JACK GREEN**

I did previously hear of Metroid Dread before, as I heard there was an Easter egg/reference in Metroid Prime 3. When I saw the announcement of a new Metroid game in the E3 Direct this year, I was able to guess that it was Metroid Dread before the title even showed up! **– ZACHARY HARRIS**

You beat me to that moment of revelation, then! I was too stunned with surprise to even begin to think that they'd actually use the "Dread" name! And then they did!

I had absolutely no idea that Metroid Dread had been in the works for so long. Learning that they had had the idea for it since like 2006 really shocked me!

I happen to be one of those people who have been cramming in as many Metroid games as possible before the release of Metroid Dread. I have briefly played both Metroid and Super Metroid on the Nintendo Switch Online service. I have not yet started the Prime Trilogy for the Wii U, though I do have it. I also recently got Other M (which isn't as bad as people say) for my birthday, and am trying to finish that before Dread's release! **– DAVY LAWRENCE**

Thanks as always to everyone who took the time to submit responses to our Player's Poll! We wouldn't have an Inbox section without you!

DON'T ANGER THE OX

I'm back. And angrier than ever!

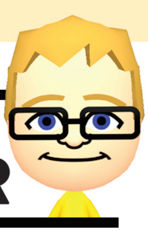
So anyway, Lucas has given me the opportunity to talk about anything I want here, and you want to know what I want to talk about?

Mavericks.

Don't you just *hate* it when you're out hunting Mavericks, and you come across one you think you recognize, but you don't know a thing about them? I do!

But now, thanks to the new Mega Man X: Maverick Hunter's Field Guide, I'll never feel lost when encountering Mavericks in the field again! This 176-page hardcover book has you covered with details on every major Maverick who's ever been likely to cross your path, and even a few of the minor ones, too! Weapons. Weaknesses. And you'll also get detailed info on your allies, armor and more! There's even full-color, full-body illustrations for everyone – even those who never had their own full artwork before!

The Mega Man X: Maverick Hunter's Field Guide is available now, wherever finer books are sold! Ask for it by name!



CARTER'S CORNER

Hello again! The answer to the quiz from last time is . . . Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle! *(Thanks Greyson for writing in and getting it right!)* I beat those three Ultimate Challenges, and I'm glad I waited to write this, because I just beat Ultimate Challenge 4 on September 12!

Also, speaking of Mario, I finally did my new speedrun of Super Mario Odyssey! The last speedrun took four hours and 44 minutes. This one just took two hours and 30 minutes! (Check it out at **YouTube.com/NFMagazine**.) I'll probably speedrun a different game in the future!

But . . . why are we doing an early quiz time? Because there's three of them! The first one is: When is my birthday? (It hasn't happened yet this year!) The second one is: How old am I turning? (That's kind of easy.) And the third one is this: What is my favorite video game? If anyone sends my Dad an email with the correct answers *(use the PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com address)*, I'll make an awesome Super Mario Maker 2 level and upload it on my birthday.

Think you can guess the correct answers?

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BRY SHARLAND'S SAMUS ARAN

Here's a make-good that's been over eight years in the making! Way, *waay* back in NF Issue #2, published in March 2013, we printed a few pieces of reader-submitted art here in the Inbox. Unfortunately, one of them was missing the credit for its artist, Bry Sharland! We apologized to Bry via email for the error, then offered to print another piece of his artwork in a future issue as a further apology for the oversight. Eight years passed! Then, back in June, the NF email account lit up with a new notification from Bry, with this great Metroid Dread artwork attached! We're happy to preserve it in print here in Issue #55, along with letting you all know that the artist's name is **BRY SHARLAND!** Ha! Also, to see more of his work, check out his Instagram page, **@BrySharlandArt**. Sorry again for that old Issue #2 error, Bry!

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Sam Gilvarry**, the winners of our Metroid Dread Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to some questions about wars. (Advance Wars, that is.)

QUESTION #1

Are you familiar with the Advance Wars series of games? If so, which did you play first? Which do you think is the best of the bunch?

QUESTION #2

When older games get modern remakes, should they try to stay true to the originals, or is it OK for them to get creative?

QUESTION #3

WayForward has brought a lot of old brands back to life, from Contra to River City Ransom to, now, Advance Wars. What old series should they revive next?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #56" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win a copy of the new Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp!

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

NEWS

Dread Sells OLED

Nintendo gives Metroid the prime position for promoting the new product!

IS IT ABSENCE that makes the heart grow fonder? Or just the anticipation of new hardware?

Back in July, Nintendo announced that it would be releasing a new model of Nintendo Switch, the OLED Model, which (as the name implies) contains a fancy new OLED screen. It's not the Switch Pro that many were hoping for, but for some – enough for pre-orders to sell out – it may just be enough.

What's more, they announced that it would be coming on October 8. As it just so happens, October 8 is *also* the day the first all-new Samus Aran adventure in over a decade arrives for the Nintendo Switch: Metroid Dread. What a coincidence!

Or not. It wasn't very long after the game was announced at E3 that Metroid Dread climbed to the top of Amazon's Best Sellers sales charts – an impressive feat for a series that has historically not sold especially well. For reference, more people bought last year's Animal Crossing: New Horizons than have bought *the entire Metroid franchise.*

But Dread? Dread managed to not only reach the top spot in the U.S. and in the U.K., but even in Japan. Metroid has historically performed worse in its homeland than in other regions, but this time its only competition seems to be Shin Megami Tensei V.

So the latest release doing big numbers is certainly nothing to *dread,* and in that, perhaps Nintendo sees an opportunity by rolling out the latest revision of their best-selling hardware alongside what may be their biggest holiday season title (shy of Pokémon).

Metroid has long had an enduring but relatively niche popularity. How ironic would it be if the entry in the series that was cancelled and restarted multiple times was not only the one to propel Samus to the next level of stardom, but bring Nintendo's latest hardware revision with it?

> "Despite how great its games have usually been, Metroid has always felt like it's been among the lesser of Nintendo's top brands, so it's great to see one of Samus' adventures get the kind of recognition the series has long deserved. Not only will it be dressed to impress on a fancy new screen, but it's effectively doubling as a launch title as well! How cool is that? I'm sure Adam would approve!"
> – DAVID

Enormous Effort

Metroid advertising is on an epic scale!

NOT ONLY IS Metroid Dread being used as the chief product to promote the new OLED model of the Switch hardware, but the game itself is seeing a nearly unprecedented push in advertising effort from Nintendo. Rarely have we seen the company go so all-out to raise awareness of a single game before!

First up, they've presented multiple trailers. That's to be expected – every game gets its own announcement video, and Metroid Dread's came "at" this year's all-virtual E3. But since then, Nintendo's followed up with more, giving deeper and more detailed looks each time, and even carving up the larger trailers into shorter, bite-sized snippets so as to make sure to still catch the eyes of anyone who doesn't want to watch five full minutes of footage of an unreleased game in one sitting. (In fact, plenty of fans have been trying to avoid all advance footage, in order to preserve as much surprise for their actual playthrough as possible!)

Next, Nintendo actually pulled back the curtain on their super secretive development practices to give us a video in which Yoshio Sakamoto brought the 16-year-old rumors of Dread's failed early versions to rest. It's *so* rare that Nintendo ever offers any insight into the makings of their games – especially now, since Mr. Iwata is no longer with us to sit down with dev teams and Ask them about their process.

A huge official website full of "Metroid Dread Reports" has offered even more behind-the-scenes information, including giving us a picture of the team's full reverence for the entire 35-year history of Metroid as a brand and as Samus' story.

But finally, the biggest thing might be Nintendo opening up their vault of old-school artwork! They've actually shared high-resolution versions of Metroid art assets from as long as 35 years ago, something the Big N has never done before! What a massive push! **– LUCAS**

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Paying Homage to Okami

Over 15 years later, Capcom's cult classic remains an inspiration.

WITH HOW MUCH Okami merchandise is continuing to release, you'd never guess that the original game was released in 2006. A sequel, Okamiden, was released on the DS in 2010, but since then the series has been fairly dormant – while the merch keeps flowing! First 4 Figures have now released five statues with several versions, totaling 11 different offerings. The first one was released in 2019, and some have yet to be released, but most are already sold out. F4F's latest Okami item is a pair of PVC statues of Shiranui (Amaterasu's previous form). One statue is in the "Celestial Howl" pose, while the other looks majestic on its stand. The exclusive version only sold on their website adds an LED glow to the Solar Flare on Shiranui's back.

MyNintendo Meets LEGO VIP

Two different brand loyalty programs have joined forces!

SUPER MARIO X LEGO has been immensely successful, so why not combine the rewards programs of both to release limited swag? On MyNintendo, members could trade 400 Platinum Points for a metal LEGO Mario keychain! But the LEGO Luigi keychain was more confusing. Offered for 500 LEGO VIP points on the LEGO site, members got a promo code to redeem for the item. The only way to redeem the code was to purchase something off the site and add the code at checkout. Both sold out incredibly quickly! Members of both could also use points to enter a crossover contest with "gold" keychains and normal LEGO Super Mario playsets as prizes.

The Legend of Mallow

One of the rarest pieces of Mario merch ever made!

AS I'VE SAID for years, there are very few items in Super Mario collecting that exceed $1,000 – but a recent auction of the fabled Super Mario RPG Mallow plush sold for over $22,000 on Yahoo Japan Auctions! It was the first auction for the item to go the full length of the auction since I first saw it back in the early 2000s. Previous auctions ended early or were pulled, suggesting an under-the-table deal. I have personally only seen four auctions and two private deals ever happen with this incredibly rare plush in over 20 years of collecting.

The Super Mario RPG plush set has been talked about for ages in my circles, and for most of that time collectors could only confirm that the set consisted of Mario, Yoshi, Boshi, a Super Star and a Super Mushroom. I had a picture of a Mallow plush from when I first started looking at Japanese auctions, but the pic wasn't great and we all speculated it could be a custom. Then a few started surfacing over the years, but nobody could get a handle on their worth due to the auctions ending and undisclosed private sales. Then someone discovered a promo image in a UFO catcher catalog for the RPG set – and it featured the legendary Mallow plush! We always thought if they'd made Mallow that Geno could've been made too, but this promo had no Geno. It was instrumental in proving Mallow existed and wasn't a custom. It was now one of the most coveted items in Mario collecting.

Why is it so rare, and why does buying one cost as much as a brand-new car? Perhaps the fallout between Nintendo and Square at the hands of Sony making exclusivity deals for their PlayStation halted production on the merchandising of Super Mario RPG. The set in general is incredibly rare, with a Boshi plush selling shortly after Mallow to the same buyer for nearly $8,000. Both can be seen being unboxed by the buyer, Dio, on my YouTube channel (YouTube.com/Nightram56). Maybe Mallow was just the rare chase figure in the cases of plushes, or maybe stock was destroyed? Nobody knows, but the combination of a decades-old legend surrounding it, knowing its rarity and confirming its legitimacy all certainly sealed its lofty auction price!

BY BRETT MARTIN

JAKKS' ATTACKS CONTINUE!

...with great new toys like the Deluxe Bowser's Airship Playset!

THOUGH THEY'VE SHIFTED from the World of Nintendo to essentially just Super Mario, Jakks has been busy with that license nonetheless. Bowser's Airship was released recently, complete with cannons, propellers and a neat feature where you store your figures in the ship. It even plays the iconic theme music! Other playsets have been released too, mainly capturing scenes from the New Super Mario Bros. series of Mario games. Clouds, Ghost House, Desert, Castle and more, and all with 2.5" figures specific to each zone. They range anywhere from $15 to $25. Meanwhile, on the figures side of the product line, a three-pack just released featuring Cat Mario and Cat Luigi – but the star of the set is the previously unreleased Cat Peach figure!

amiibo UPDATE

AMIIBO LIVES IN 2021!

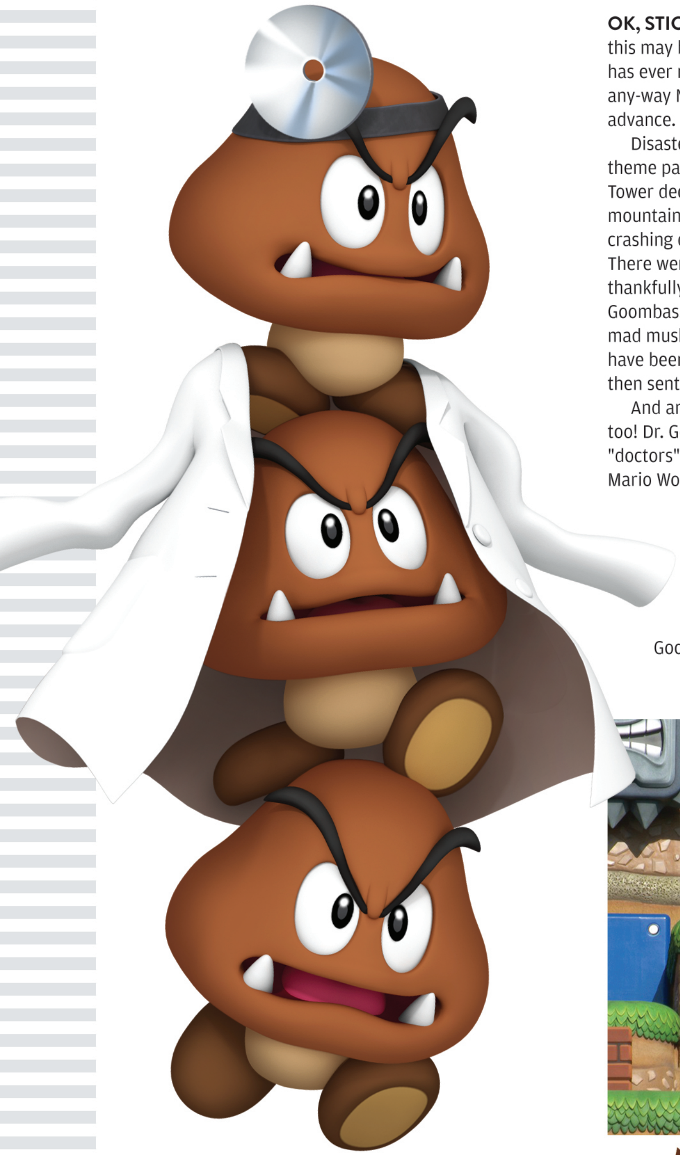
With the upcoming release of Metroid Dread, two new amiibo are keeping the phenomenon alive. Samus in her new suit targets the menacing new enemy E.M.M.I. in a two-figure double pack. Scanning Samus into the game will net players an extra Energy Tank that raises her health by 100, while scanning E.M.M.I. will grant her a Missile Plus Tank, allowing her to hold 10 more Missiles. After these initial rewards, scanning the two will replenish a small amount of energy or Missiles once per day.

Samus looks to be a regular-sized amiibo, but E.M.M.I. is bursting off the normal amiibo stand, adding ship wreckage so the bad bot can take the correct pose. This got me reminiscing about past amiibo and how each one had to solve the problem of balance and fitting on the stand! Some of those Smash Bros. poses were definitely designed without the thought of having to translate them to plastic. One of the earliest ones, Link, had one of the worst ways to solve this problem, with an ugly yellow pillar of plastic aiding his one-legged action pose. When the Breath of the Wild Link was made, they added a swoosh of wind to hide the pedestal and keep the one-legged pose. Much more elegant!

Also in the early sets, Fox had a blue pedestal suspending his knee, and Captain Falcon had a crazy tall clear pillar to aid his kicking pose. Others felt more necessary, like what Luigi's ridiculous Smash pose rests on, Luma's tower or the Duck in Duck Hunt's suspension above the Dog. Then there's the Guardian amiibo that probably should have skipped the silly stand to just plant the NFC on its bottom. The less intrusive or more hidden the pedestals were the better, and they've definitely evolved over time!

Watch Out for Falling Goombas!

Woes befall the Worlds of both Super Nintendo and Dr. Mario; two Goomba Towers are toppled.

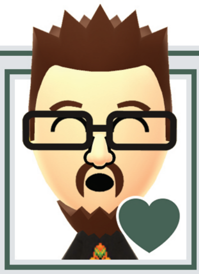


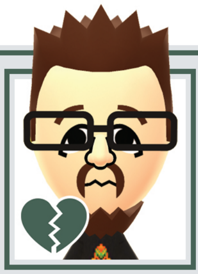
OK, STICK WITH me for a moment here, because this may be the most ridiculous connection my brain has ever made between two not-actually-related-in-any-way Nintendo news stories. I apologize in advance.

Disaster struck the new Super Nintendo World theme park in Japan in early August, as the Goomba Tower decoration placed prominently up on the mountain housing the Yoshi's Adventure ride came crashing down and landed on the ride's track below. There were no passengers in the pathway at the time, thankfully, so no one was hurt. Except for the Goombas, that is! Usually it's Mario who stomps the mad mushroom minions flat, but this time it must have been a strong gust of wind that dislodged them, then sent them careening down to stomp themselves.

And another Goomba Tower is on its way out soon, too! Dr. Goomba Tower, one of the dozens of different "doctors" illegally practicing medicine in the Dr. Mario World mobile game, will be out of work (along with all the others) when that game gets its plug pulled on November 1. It just hasn't proven nearly as popular or profitable as Nintendo's other mobile games, so it's getting shut down! Harsh. 2021 is turning out to be a tough year for Goomba Towers. Hold together, guys! — **LUCAS**

Great! The Metroid brand is getting a major boost!





Oh. Super Nintendo World's already falling apart?

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

GETTING THE BALL rolling in the month of October will be Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania! It's due to drop on the first Tuesday of the month, October 5 (giving it just three quick days' worth of distance between it and Nintendo's next major launch!) As eager as you may be to get Samus to roll up into her Morph Ball form in an all-new game, though, don't miss these monkeys in their balls first! (And some non-monkeys?) See Page 42!

ARGUABLY THE BIGGEST release date left on the slate for 2021, October 8 will host the debut of both Metroid Dread and the new Nintendo Switch (OLED Model)! It's guaranteed to be a day long remembered, especially since so many of us aging Metroid fans have been waiting for the series' main story to continue for nearly 20 years! See Page 38.

YOU'LL HAVE ONLY 20 days to recover from the initial sense of fear instilled within you from first playing Metroid Dread before a new source of terror will appear to assault your sanity! The new Switch port of the previously Wii U-exclusive Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water will begin its hauntings on Thursday, October 28. It's had a couple of content cuts, but also some additions, so catch up on that news on Page 53.

FATAL FRAME IS a perfect Halloween game if you like the spooky side of the holiday, but if you're more interested in colorful costumes and candy, the new Mario Party Superstars will be more your speed. It arrives just two days before trick-or-treat time, on Friday, October 29. We've got another look ready for you beginning on Page 48!

AFTER THE COSTUMES return to the closet and all of the tummyaches have come and gone (hopefully), the Switch will shift right back into spooky mode with the long-awaited arrival of Shin Megami Tensei V on November 12. If exploring the ruins of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo and befriending dozens of different demons sounds like your kind of good time, flip over to Page 47 for one last pre-launch look!

LASTLY, AN UNFORTUNATE update for the release date of the game that appeared on our last issue's cover. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge, previously set to debut by the end of 2021, has sadly now slipped into 2022. There is a bit of good news to counterbalance the bad, though, so check out the reveal on Page 43!

October this year seems almost perfectly balanced between wholesome family fun and tension-building frights! It's a nice blend for the Halloween season, for sure. If you're able to, and if you have even the slightest interest in it, I'd advise you to try to play Metroid Dread right when it's first released! If it goes down in Nintendo history as a true classic like several of its predecessors have, you definitely want to be able to say you were there from Day 1! — **LUCAS**

WE'RE HEADING TO press again without the final Smash DLC fighter having been revealed yet, so there's time to make one last guess about who it's going to be! I still think Waluigi has a strong chance at claiming the final slot, but in the time since I made him my official final pick, I've had another thought: Balloon Fighter!

We made the case for this character back in NF Issue #17: Thank You, Mr. Iwata. He would be a sentimental selection — I know Mr. Sakurai has powered through years of Smash development due in no small part to his promise to Mr. Iwata that he would. Making the final Ultimate fighter be Mr. Iwata's own creation, Balloon Fighter, might not make a ton of financial sense, but it could be one last way to honor Satoru Iwata in the fighting series he also helped create!

BALLOON FIGHTER ARTWORK BY **MARK KELLY**

WILL GAME BOY LAND ON SWITCH?

Rumor has it that the Nintendo Switch Online selection will soon expand once again!

THE CUT-OFF DATE for content in this issue was September 17. I feel the need to say that right up front, since there's a chance that the rumor I'm about to discuss might become actual reality soon after we send this issue off to be printed! That rumor?

Game Boy games are coming to Nintendo Switch Online!

Again, it's not set in stone as I'm writing this, but recent reports from Nintendo Life, Eurogamer and more are all pointing to the same addition to the NSO service: Nintendo's original black-and-white portable will see its games go digital for NSO subscribers.

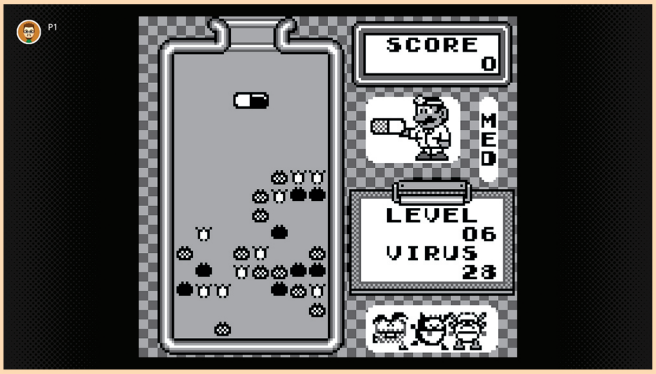
Prior to September 2018, online features in Nintendo Switch games could be accessed for free. When the Big N made the change to gating that access behind paid Nintendo Switch Online subscriptions, they softened the blow by making a selection of old 8-bit NES games available as a bonus for anyone who signed up. Metroid. The Legend of Zelda. Super Mario Bros. 1 and 2 and 3, and dozens more classics (as well as several obscure oddballs) are now playable on Switch.

NES titles alone weren't a huge draw, though, especially just a couple of years after the NES Mini was sold and tapped into that same nostalgia. So a year later, in September 2019, Nintendo expanded the NSO selection of retro titles by adding SNES games! Super Metroid. The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. Super Mario World and Yoshi's Island and, again, a whole bunch of weird under-the-radar third-party games to fill in the ranks. All (or at least most) were welcome additions – but their appeal too, two years later, has grown thin.

The natural next step might be to add Nintendo 64 titles, and that's a rumor in the mix as well, but Game Boy games seem to be up first.

I'm thrilled! The Game Boy is host to some of Nintendo's most unsung game designs. Playing a portable with no colors in its display already felt like an archaic thing back when Game Boy was brand-new (and its competitors tried their best to shame it for that), and 30 years later it's definitely a hard sell to get any modern gamers to pay any attention to its titles. But added to Nintendo Switch Online, for free, with its Netflix-style interface for casually browsing around and dipping in and out of various games at your own pace? That's perfect.

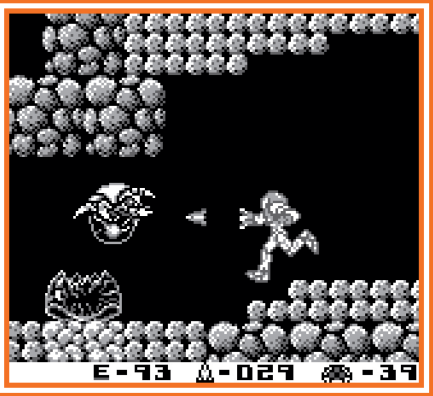
It could be more perfect, though.



THESE ARE JUST MOCK-UP SCREENS! GAME BOY GAMES COULD LOOK LIKE THIS ON SWITCH.

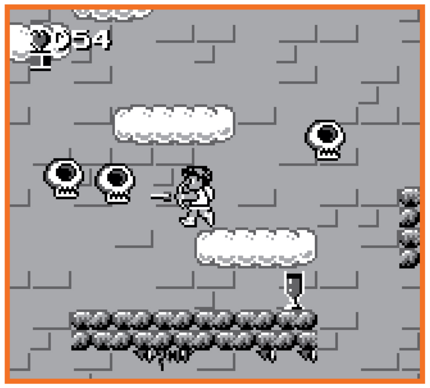
SIX HITS I HOPE TO SEE FIRST

If Nintendo follows the same pattern we've seen with the NES and SNES NSO apps, a small selection of games will be made available first, with others added in the months that follow. Here are some games I hope make the first cut!



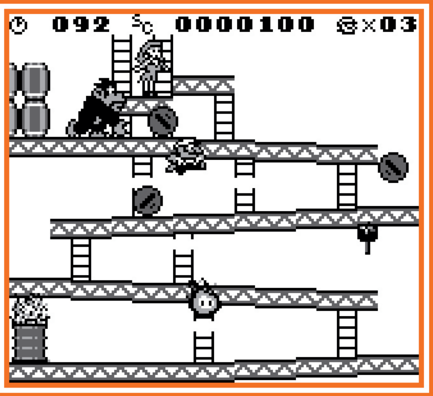
METROID II: RETURN OF SAMUS

We might not be able to play the whole mainline Metroid story on Switch yet, but having access to the original Metroid II would get us one step closer. Though Samus Returns' remake was great, the truly unsettling atmosphere of this source material is worth revisiting.



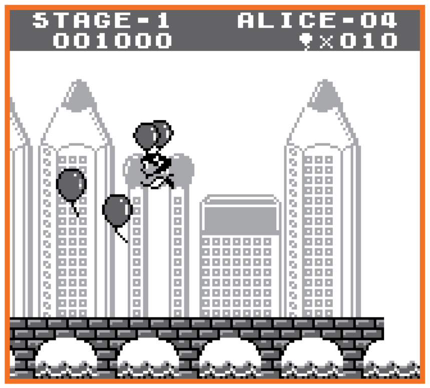
KID ICARUS: OF MYTHS AND MONSTERS

Just like the NES Metroid got a Game Boy sequel to continue its story, so too did its sister game, Kid Icarus! This wildly underplayed second quest of Pit is more refined than its predecessor, as well as more goofy: It includes a triangle-chucking enemy named Pythagoras!



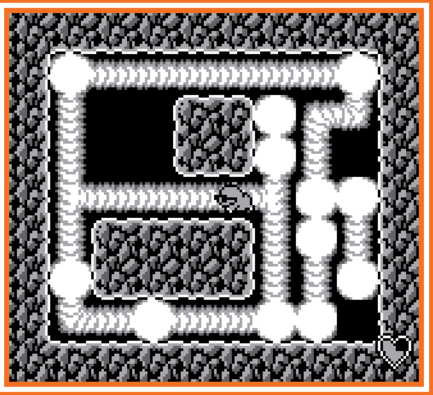
DONKEY KONG

Also known as Donkey Kong '94, this game begins as a simple remake of the four-level 1981 Donkey Kong arcade game . . . before totally exploding in scope with 96 more levels spread across a grand globetrotting adventure! It was also the "launch title" for Super Game Boy, so I'd love to see its extra colors once again.



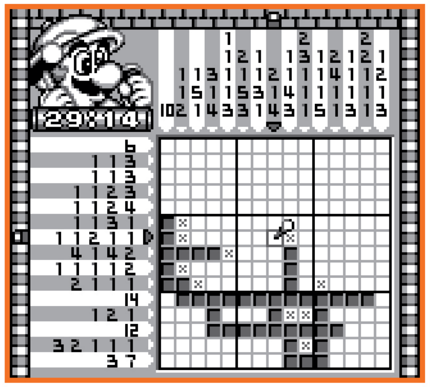
BALLOON KID

We've mentioned Balloon Kid a time or two in the past, but it merits mention again! This story-driven sequel to Mr. Iwata's arcade-inspired NES classic Balloon Fight takes the arm-flapping, balloon-grabbing gameplay of that original to new heights as you take command of a brave girl named Alice on a quest to save her brother!



MOLE MANIA

One of the great injustices of recent Nintendo history is the fact that we somehow went through the entire era of dual-screened handhelds – DS *and* 3DS – and never got a sequel to this spectacular puzzler that takes place on two planes: above and below the ground. Letting us replay the original is the least Nintendo could do!



MARIO'S PICROSS

Lastly, but not leastly, the old-school origin point of Picross puzzling on Nintendo platforms. Now, granted, there are tons of Picross games available on Switch as it is. Mario's Super Picross is even already in the SNES NSO app! But I'd still love to go back to this first game, casually chiseling away at puzzles with good old Mario.

Not yet knowing the details of how Game Boy games will be presented if and when they are added to NSO, I do worry that we won't get any color options. When the 3DS hosted Game Boy titles as Virtual Console releases beginning a decade ago, you could only choose to view them either in shades of grey or shades of green. Both accurate to the old-school Game Boy experience, sure, but both missing the mark of the system's later years!

I'm speaking, of course, of Super Game Boy. That legendary adapter that allowed players to plug Game Boy cartridges into a Super Nintendo to play them on a TV! It boldly brightened up the whole Game Boy library, offering users control over which colors to use in displaying older titles, while also rendering new, specially programmed releases like Donkey Kong '94 tons of extra color built-in, as well as fancy frames that bordered the action and filled up the remaining space around the edges of the TV display. 3DS Virtual Console denied us these niceties, so I'm crossing my fingers that the Switch will restore them.

A more sure-fire hope is an accurate re-creation of the classic Game Boy Link Cable experience. The existing NES and SNES NSO apps already offer online multiplayer – a major modern feature upgrade. So the two-player modes included in so many GB hits, which previously required two Game Boy units and a physical cable linking the pair of them together, should make a comeback here. The 3DS Virtual Console had more success in this area, specifically when the early Pokémon games kept their trading features intact in the transition to digital.

Those two things would be enough to satisfy me: reviving the Super Game Boy functionality and preserving multiplayer modes. But I know not everyone out there will be OK with just that!

Which is why it's a good thing that the same rumor going around about Game Boy also includes Game Boy Color. GBC is an entirely different hardware generation, so I'd personally think the two would get two separate apps and they wouldn't release together – the older monochrome games would get instantly outshined again. But, on the other hand, Nintendo didn't add any new systems to the NSO lineup last year, so I could also see them doing a double this time to play catch-up.

. . . Just don't hope for Game Boy Advance too, OK? That's been some fans' instant reaction to this rumor online, and I get it – GBA is amazing – but if that library ever did come to Switch, it would have to be after GB and GBC first. (I know, I know. I'd also like to play Fusion and Zero Mission on Switch before Dread! But what can you do?)

I'll tell you what: Play and enjoy the old Game Boy games instead. (If we get them.) They deserve a lot more love! **– LUCAS**

It's Star-Lord, Man!

. . . in Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy: Cloud Version.

THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY are coming to the Nintendo Switch!

"Who?", you might be asking. And for that, take a cookie. You've earned it.

Announced by Square Enix at E3 2021, Guardians of the Galaxy (technically "Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy," in case you weren't sure whose Guardians of the Galaxy we were dealing with) is another one of those games that's based on the films of the same name from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but also not – that is to say, the cast of characters is the same, their basic looks are the same, the way they act is about the same, but it's otherwise its own thing.

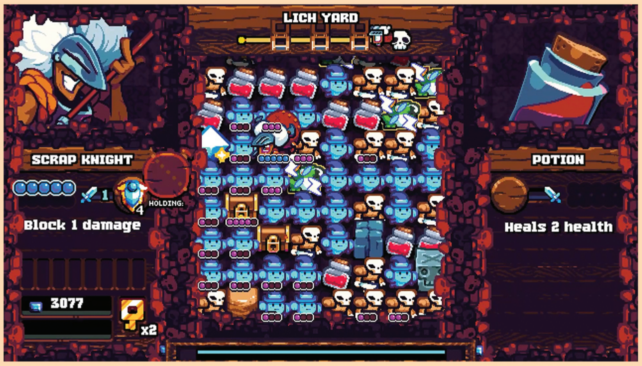
Sort of like Square Enix's take on Marvel's The Avengers, only hey, we're actually getting this one on Switch! Well, sort of. We're getting it streaming through the cloud. Close enough, right? Well, maybe not if your internet stinks.

On the upside, if your internet doesn't stink, you should find yourself immersed in an experience that's largely unlike Earth's Grindiest Heroes. According to the developers at Eidos-Montréal, there will be no online component, no annoying microtransactions and no plans for downloadable content. Just a nice one-'n-done adventure, because we've all got other stuff to play, too.

Not only will there not be multiplayer, but there won't be multi-character, either. At least, in the sense that you only have one role to play here: You are not Groot, but Star-Lord. (A.K.A. Peter Quill.) As Quill, you'll be in charge of calling the shots for the other Guardians, since Eidos-Montréal felt that by making him the heart of the team, the other colorful personalities would be able to better bounce off choices made by the player.

But just because you're playing as the only Earthling in the whole crew doesn't mean it'll be boring; you'll still get to freeze foes with Star-Lord's handy Element Gun and zip around with his snazzy jet boots. You'll also be able to give commands to the other Guardians (Gamora, Drax, Rocket and Groot) in combat, even calling together a team huddle to deliver an inspirational speech backed by some '80s music in the hopes of buffing the team.

The only question left, then, is whether or not you'll be able to challenge big bosses to dance-offs, bro! — **DAVID**



A Few New (Hidden) Faces

Unearthing new Knights in Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon!

ONE OF THE best things about being a Mega Man fan around 30 years ago was the sense of anticipation surrounding new Robot Master reveals. The series was getting new sequels so quickly, and Blue Bomber diehards knew that each one would come complete with a whole new set of "Men" to meet and beat. Pharaoh Man! Napalm Man! Centaur Man?! It was a constant onslaught of surprises.

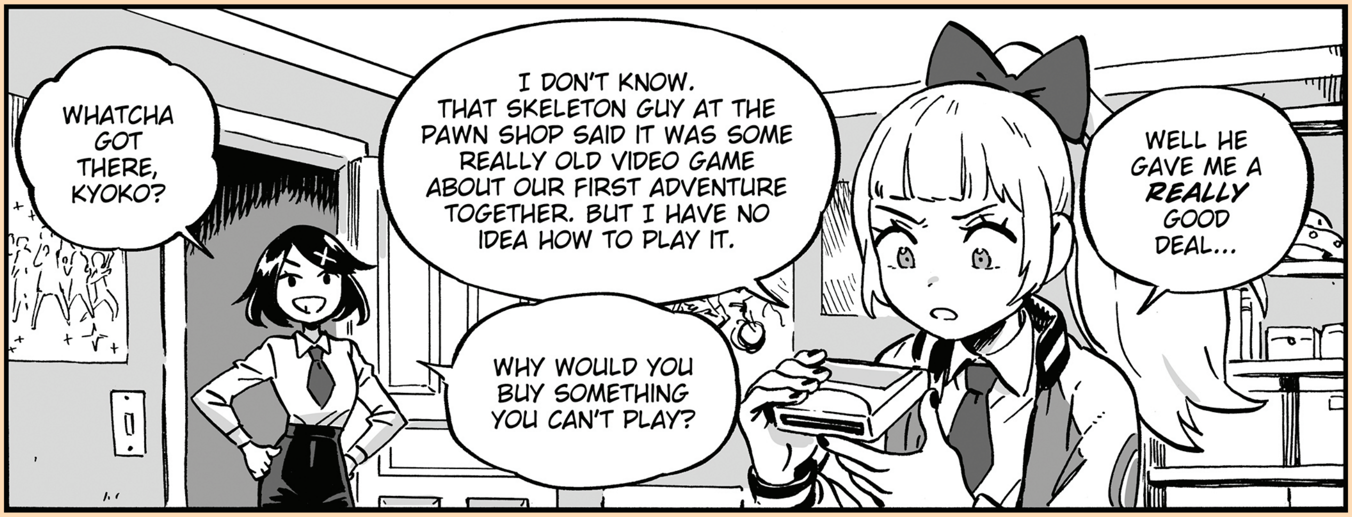
And now the Shovel Knight series is entering that same era! Having finally moved on from the Treasure Trove adventures that all mostly shared the same cast members, new games just over the horizon are poised to introduce all-new Knights – and each reveal is making me just as happy as Mega Man's Robot Master reveals did 30 years ago!

First up will be Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon, the puzzle genre spin-off that's set to debut "This Winter" according to Yacht Club Games. Appropriately, its first new cast member is Puzzle Knight, a world-traveling curator of curiosities! His mastery of all manner of confounding conundrums should make him an excellent ally as Shovel Knight begins digging into the perplexing new Pocket Dungeon.

Also found within the Pocket Dungeon's depths will be Prism Knight, a master of light whose magical Prismatic Mace helps her fight back against the darkness that surrounds her. She can use pure light to make mirages of herself and even bedazzle her opponents in battle! That's brilliant!

Lastly, we've caught a brief glimpse of another new character named Scrap Knight as well. Not as much is known about her yet, but she seems to be a trash-obsessed hoarder who's wielding some kind of polearm. Maybe it's one of those garbage-grabbing rods used by highway cleanup crews!

That's just three new Knights for starters, all hailing from Pocket Dungeon, but we know the also-upcoming new Shovel Knight Dig will introduce fresh Knights as well – it's a fun time for old speculation-loving grown-up kids like me. Who will be next? — **LUCAS**



Origin of the River City Girls!

WayForward looks way backward (to 1994) for the new River City Girls Zero.

IN OUR LAST issue, we took a first look at River City Girls 2, the all-new sequel that's in development now for WayForward's female-focused Kunio-kun spin-off series. It's due to hit the Switch in 2022, and it's safe to say it's already shaping up to be a smash hit.

But that's not all! We've always said two is better than one, and WayForward and Limited Run agree, as those two companies are partnering to bring out not one, but two new River City Girls titles! The second one is called River City Girls Zero, and it's the long-overdue localization of Shin Nekketsu Kōha: Kunio-tachi no Banka, the 1994 Super Famicom game that was the first in the series to feature Misako and Kyoko as playable characters.

As before, we reached out to WayForward's Adam Tierney and Bannon Rudis for more info!

"What people will get with River City Girls Zero is a faithful port of the 1994 game that inspired River City Girls, released officially in English and in the U.S. for the first time," said Adam. "If you want to play the game in its original Japanese text, you can still do that in RCG Zero. Or a direct English translation, or a second English translation flavored a bit more like RCG1's dialogue, as well as several other languages."

He continued, "We also dressed up the release in some RCG-themed presentation, including a brand-new anime intro, a new vocal song by Megan McDuffee (written specifically to sound like it could've been produced in the mid-'90s), and two manga cutscenes that bookend the game with English V.O. from Kyoko and Misako. We think RCG fans will love these additions, as well as trying out a game that is effectively the origin of River City Girls."

Reaching over a quarter-century back into the past to resurrect a retro title like this has to be tough, so we asked what the biggest challenge was!

"The biggest was probably deciding between whether to have a literal English translation for purists, or an RCG-style one for fans of RCG. So we decided to solve that by just offering both. Beyond that, most everything else was pretty cut and dry," Adam replied. "There are examples of Japanese text in the game as imagery in the background, or in cutscenes, but we're not planning on translating that art. We'd prefer to leave it as-is so that players can experience the original game without any extra noodling on our part."

No extra noodling confirmed!

After River City Girls 1 was a success and 2 was greenlit, WayForward expanded their ambitions with the Kunio-kun brand by also grabbing the rights to revive this long-lost 16-bit sequel. But make no mistake — this game has been the foundation of the modern revival all along. That will become more apparent when players experience both this new localization and River City Girls 2 one after another.

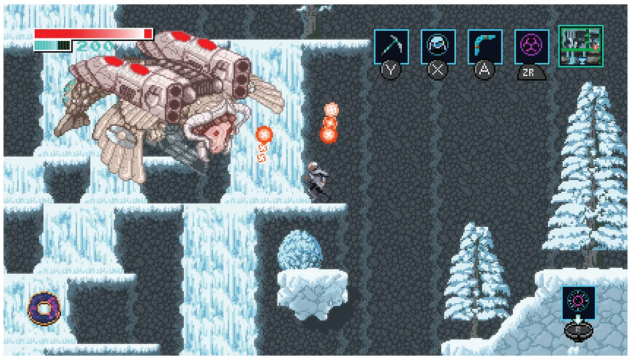
"RCG2 is tied even more directly to the 1994 game than RCG1 was," Adam confirmed.

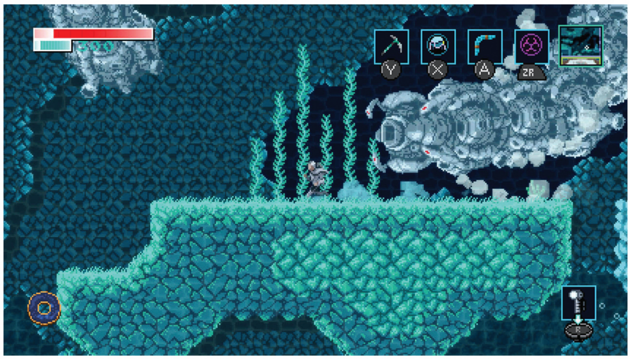
Finally, we asked what it is about Kunio-kun/River City that makes its games so timeless. We'll give Bannon the last word:

"They have such a sense of charm. There's nothing overly bombastic or surreal about them. They started off as characters with big, expressive, goofy faces just punching and kicking each other in the streets, and that's all I needed to be hooked on the series as a kid. The fact that they took those characters and put them into sports titles with ever-increasing lunacy is what really made me a fan. They took normal settings and turned them into creative playgrounds for us to explore and enjoy. That's what I hope we can achieve with River City Girls. Capturing that sense of freedom and fun and introducing it to a brand-new audience while rekindling the love we had back in the day for the original series."

River City Girls Zero is currently set to race to the Switch before the end of 2021! **— LUCAS**

Q&A QUESTIONS BY JONATHAN HOLMES





A Second One-Man Metroidvania

AXIOM VERGE 2

WE ALL DREAD feeling trapped. All our phobias, our worries, are worst-case scenarios; they all render us powerless. Maybe you're afraid of drowning, or of being betrayed by someone you trust, or, maybe worst of all, being cut off from someone you love. While different on the surface, these fears are all rooted in helplessness. No one wants to feel trapped.

But what do you do when you really are trapped? How do you cope? When there is no clear door to safety and security, how will you make your own path? The way we answer these kinds of questions does a lot to define us. For Tom Happ, the one-man development team for and creator of the Axiom Verge series, this game is one of those answers.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: THOMAS HAPP GAMES
RATING: T

When he started work on Axiom Verge 2, Tom and his family had just been rendered helpless in sweeping, life-altering ways. Shortly after Axiom Verge 1 was released, Tom's son Alastair was born, and it was one of the greatest moments in his life. Soon after, doctors told Tom and his wife that their son had a condition called Kernicterus that altered the way his mind and body connect. In some ways, he may be stuck in his own skin. As he grew, he'd need adaptive equipment and additional supports, and because Kernicterus is irreversible, no one knew how much for how long. Tom and his wife could adapt, but they could never change what had happened to their son. There was no going back, only forward.

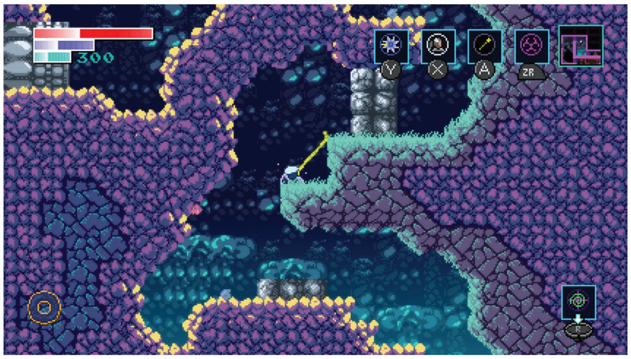
I'm telling you all this because, though Tom never comes out and says it, these are the things that Axiom Verge 2 is really about. You can play the game without knowing these things, but if you do, it probably won't make you cry like it made me cry. It would probably just feel like another great search action game (a.k.a. a Metroidvania) on the Switch eShop. But the more you understand what Axiom Verge 2 really is, and why it was made, the more you can get out of it. It's a great game, but it's an even better story of life in the face of disability.

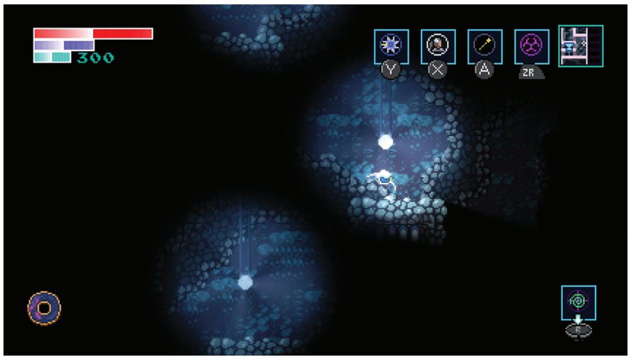
Axiom Verge 2 stars a billionaire named Indra. Unlike the first game, this one starts off in the real world. Everything seems normal enough. Then, tragedy strikes, and before you know it, Indra is in a very strange place, with powers and limitations that she could have never anticipated.

While Axiom Verge 1 took a lot from the first Metroid, the sequel feels more like a cross between Zeldas; specifically, The Adventure of Link and Breath of the Wild. There are no guns this time – just a melee weapon and boomerang. You can also grab onto ledges, and eventually, learn to climb walls. It's a very athletic game, designed to make you feel how physically strong and confident Indra is.

Little does she know she's being set up for a fall. Actually, many falls. Everything for her is great until it suddenly isn't, and that's when she has to sink or swim, dig deeper or fade away.

How exactly she goes about that dig is up to you. You can fight, flee, sneak and even hack, at least most of the time. Weirdly enough, nearly all the enemies in the game are drones, tracking you with a color-coded "line of sight" system, just like the E.M.M.I. in Metroid Dread. It feels almost like a Bug's Life vs. Antz/Volcano vs. Dante's Peak situation, where the similarities between two games in the same genre seem too tight to be a coincidence. The big difference is, Indra can hack these





enemies and make them work for her. It's all part of how the game goes for a certain kind of pragmatic realism. Like in Breath of the Wild, bosses are usually just hanging out in their natural habitat before you stumble upon them, and are usually better off left alone. One of them even has a lion's head, but unlike the Lynels that Link faces off against, this one's got a rocket launcher.

For the first third or so of the game, that's the adventure. You map out new areas, gain new abilities, talk with NPCs and try to get back home. There's no "villain" to speak of, or character motivation beyond that. But things change when Indra absorbs the spirit of a young child who has lost his body. He's an "ARM," a person who was turned into a weapon, and most of Indra's abilities come from beings like him.

He's not like the others, though. He allows Indra to transform into a tiny spider drone that . . . seems like a downgrade? It can't climb walls or throw a boomerang. It has less health and power than Indra. But it's valuable. *He* is valuable. And in the end, the relationship between Indra and this child will decide their collective fate.

At first, you just need the drone to get around. It's the only way to enter "The Breach," a world that feels a lot more like the alien landscape of Axiom Verge 1. The graphics look more like an NES game. The music is all chiptune remixes of the more lush, organic soundtrack that Indra experiences in the real world.

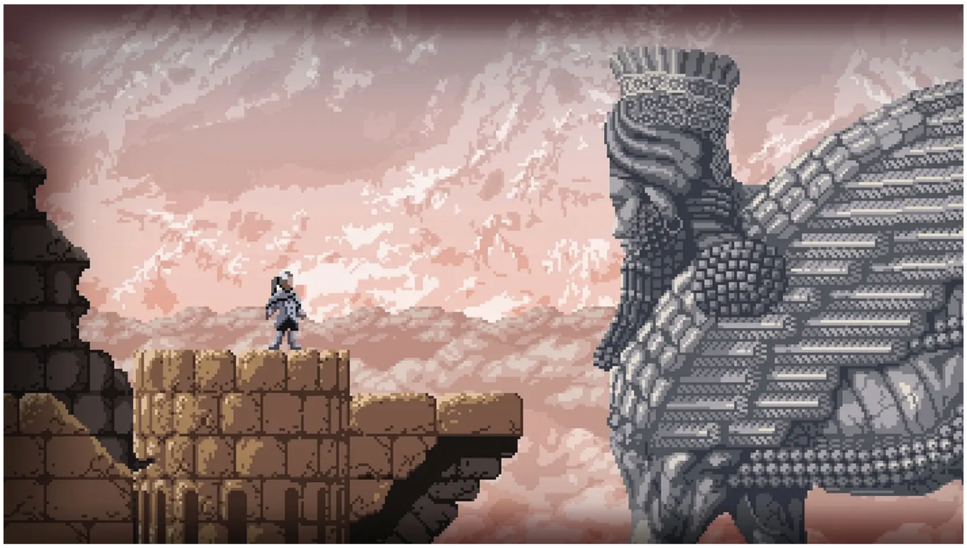
At first, entering The Breach as the drone feels like a novelty — just another power for Indra to experiment with. Then, through a twist that made me gasp out loud, it becomes a necessity. Axiom Verge 2 does something that many games are afraid to: It takes things away from you, and you must adapt. Like someone learning to walk with a prosthetic limb after an amputation, you have to unlearn what you thought you knew about getting from Point A to Point B, and start being more thoughtful. Easy steps, once committed to muscle memory, must be replaced with three, four or even five carefully considered moves. It's hard. It's unfair. It's scary. But when you get good at it, it's incredibly rewarding.

The game's cutscenes and overarching narrative follow a similar theme. While there are plenty of connections to Axiom Verge 1 throughout, especially in the last few hours, Indra's story works perfectly as a standalone experience. It's more important that you know what happened in Tom and his family's life before this than what happened in the game's prequel, though in a way, they're also one and the same.

There are a few technical things about Axiom Verge 2 that I don't love; areas where Tom seems to aim beyond his areas of expertise and doesn't quite hit the mark. Some of the game's "real-world objects" like trucks and helicopters don't look as convincing and captivating as the giant techno-organic monsters and other pure fantasy elements that came straight out of Tom's creative brain. Stranger still, some of these incredible bosses can't really kill you as long as you don't give up. On one hand, that's a nice message, and it fits with the game's theme. On the other, it makes those victories feel a little hollow.

These are all minor bumps in the road though. As a whole, Axiom Verge 2 is amazing. Many have tried to make games that can work as light entertainment and heavy, honest stories about their own lives at the same time. Few have succeeded as well as this one.

Now my only problem is, I can't wait to see what Tom will make next! He's got a lot to live up to, but I'm sure that once again, he and his family will pull off what many would call impossible. **— JONATHAN**



9.5

Plight of the Crumblebee

STONEFLY

6.5

STONEFLY IS A fascinating conundrum: a game that is fantastic in almost all aspects of its design, but which, due to a single, relatively minor flaw, is a real struggle to enjoy.

Nearly every aspect of Stonefly, from its premise, to its presentation, storytelling and gameplay, is awe-inspiring. It's such a shame, then, that it ultimately feels like a bit of a chore to actually play the game.

Stonefly plays with traditional concepts of scale. The player character, Annika, is a teeny tiny mechanic in a world of huge leafy trees and gigantic bugs. This is a frontier setting; a Wild West in which scavengers survive by piloting insectoid mechs, crossing dangerous terrain in search of supplies and gear. Think The Borrowers meets Firefly and you'll have a good sense of what's going on here.

On paper, this premise is fantastic. It's exciting to venture out into the unknown, looking for pockets of treasure, bartering with fellow travellers for parts to fix up a collection of ramshackle mechs that all look and control like various creepy crawlies.

It also helps that the game is a masterpiece in terms of both art and animation. The art style is wholly original – it looks like a cross between papercraft and Donkey Kong Country, with bright, bold colors, rich textures and unique, crunchy lighting that gives the entire experience a deep, visceral feeling. It doesn't always work, but with something so bold, it's easy to forgive a few moments of imperfection.

Meanwhile, the storytelling is second to none – Annika's world is filled with life, and her personal journey is instantly appealing. It's hard not to grow attached both to her and the colorful cast of characters she meets on her journeys. Fans of story-driven games have a lot to latch onto here.

A game, though, is only as good as its actual gameplay. Here this primarily involves hopping between branches and leaves, searching for treasure and swatting away actual bugs that are competing with your mechanical insect for precious resources. Combat is fairly straightforward: You flip enemies onto their backs, then blow them away with a gust of wind, aiming for a ringout rather than a knockout. Think of it as a top-down, mostly mellow insectoid sumo match.

This, alas, is where the game's biggest failing rears its head. In theory, this combat would be fine, but in practice, there's no weight to any of your mech's actions.

The missing element – one of the biggest challenges in game design – is a satisfying game feel. There's not enough feedback from using the gust ability; mechs never feel like they're delivering a strong blow. Combat in Stonefly essentially feels like blowing through a straw to try to move a pebble – it's tiresome, ineffective and tedious.

This is such a shame, as it compromises an otherwise magnificent game. It's an excellent example of just how important it is for a game to feel good, as well as looking and sounding good. A little calibration or tweaking, and this game could be something magnificent. As it is, playing Stonefly just feels tedious – literally like trying to swat an annoying fly that keeps buzzing out of reach.

Stonefly is so close to being an unmissable work of art. It's incredibly disappointing that, due to a lack of polish in one aspect, it's difficult to recommend. **– MATTHEW L.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MWM INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: FLIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO RATING: E

Watch Out, Boy, She'll Chew You Up!

MANEATER

YOU'RE THE STAR of a new reality show, "Shark Hunters vs. Maneaters" – and you're not one of the hunters.

Setting a game inside the context of a fake reality show is clever, and Maneater sells it further with narration from Chris Parnell of SNL and Rick and Morty fame. Parnell mixes a weird chum of shark facts, social commentary and exposition while following your nemesis, Scaly Pete.

You start the game as an adult bull shark for the tutorial of combat and swimming, and then it throws you into the deep end, noshing on humans and fighting hunters.

Then Scaly Pete captures you.

Once he does, he discovers you were a mommy shark – a pregnant mommy shark. And you next become her baby shark. (Doo doo doo doo!)

I had to exit the game during this cutscene, and it returned me to the cove as the mommy with missions I couldn't complete: a reproducible progression bug. Confusion set in, so my opinion was soured before I had to restart.

Experiencing the fragility of being a baby was interesting, but incredibly jarring after being a giant predator with skills I no longer possessed. As a result, the first third of the game is a slow burn of avoidance and grinding. You eat, then spend what you consume on evolutions.

Everything from bony skin to electric teeth can be added, but it unlocks slowly. There is a level cap, but once you reach it there are still enemies far beyond your level that you have to figure out how to take down. The game traps you behind grates and dams that you have to be large enough to jump over or break through. You can reach new areas by level grinding before their missions unlock, so I often felt overpowered because I'd dared to explore and collect. I will admit finding landmarks was fun and often funny, and the environs had somewhat interesting stories.

The action is as mindless as the story. Your ZR Button is going to get a lot of exercise, as that's the default chomp button. The things you chomp are mostly humans and fictitious fauna, and caring about either when all you do is eat is asking too much.

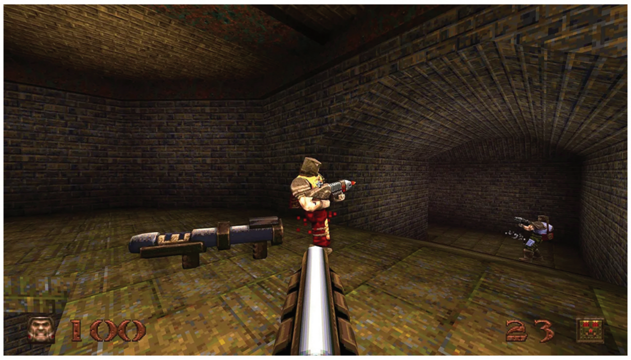
The controls are unforgiving. The camera does a lot of heavy lifting in basic movement and is your biggest foe. A weak targeting system attempts to assist you by pinpointing prey or predator, but spins around so wildly it's disorienting. The frame rate during encounters can get so bad the game will exit to a loading screen and spit you back out mid-battle. There are plenty of things in the game to collect, but many of them require jumping out of the water or even traversing land. Jumping was just so broken and frustrating that I found it untenable. Your shark can evolve to jump better and live on land longer, but leaving the water exacerbates the already broken controls.

There are memorable moments, but you'll have to wade through myriad problems and poor design decisions in order to chomp into the meat of Maneater. **– BRETT**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TRIPWIRE INTERACTIVE

RATING: M



An Incredibly Impressive PC Port

QUAKE

DOOM MADE A household/school-wide/office-wide name out of id, and their gothic follow-up, Quake, successfully managed to deliver with another hyper-violent smash hit FPS. Gone were the flatly horizontal mazes of Mars, now replaced with full 3D chambers and ghoulishly haunting demons to challenge players with even faster and more brutal combat.

Quake wasn't ported to quite as many home consoles as DOOM and, as a result, doesn't command quite the same levels of historic notoriety. But now, Bethesda has aimed to resurrect Quake with a new, extremely feature-rich enhanced port on modern consoles.

This port is presented with slavishly faithful accuracy ranging from the highs – barely any changes to level layouts and enemy A.I. – to just a few lows – the menus and U.I. remain the same as they were in 1996 on MS-DOS. (That includes having to awkwardly navigate using outdated matchmaking tools.)

There are thankfully quite a few new and updated gameplay adjustments that make Quake easier to pick up and play for modern audiences, however. A time-slowing weapon wheel makes deftly cycling through gear a breeze, and highly responsive motion aiming bridges the gap somewhat between PC and console players – an absolute must with the addition of cross-platform deathmatch and co-op modes.

While the motion controls offer a fine-tuned level of precision to match Quake's speed, they do tend to get a bit confused when used in Handheld Mode, so this feature works best when playing docked.

MachineGames, known for their recent Wolfenstein reboot, has developed an all-new original campaign specifically for this port, a follow-up to their previous new campaign from Quake's 20th anniversary (also included). It's always impressive seeing such modern level design running in the original Quake engine, but even series veterans should be prepared for the high level of skill and speed this new content demands. Returning players might want to refresh their atrophied skills with a base game replay before jumping into this expansion.

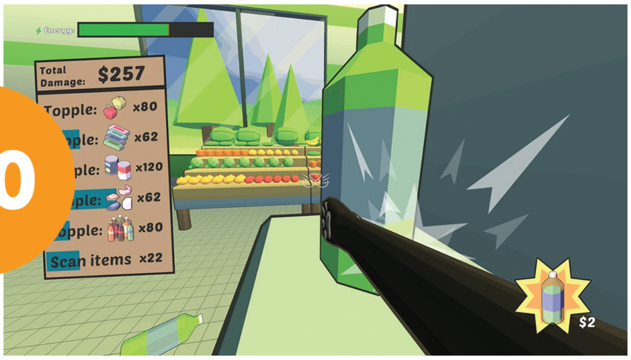
If you missed Quake back in the day, this port is a fantastic way to experience this genre-defining work, especially for fans of 2016's DOOM. While a lot of the old-school design choices may feel simple by modern standards, it results in an elegantly intense game that's still an addicting delight to pick up for even a short session of a few minutes.

Oh, one more thing – the N64 version of Quake is also included as an added bonus, although Trent Reznor's ambient score is swapped out for alternate original tracks. It's not the ideal way to enjoy Quake, but still makes for a surprising addition, making this a definitive re-release of a true classic. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BETHESDA DEVELOPERS: ID SOFTWARE & MACHINEGAMES RATING: M

8.0



It's a Total Cat-astrophe!

CATLATERAL DAMAGE: REMEOWSTERED

THE DIFERENCE BETWEEN a cat and a 5-year-old comes down to two things: how much they can talk and how high they can jump. That connection helps make Catlateral Damage: Remeowstered one of the best kids' games of 2021. Anyone who fancies cats and their purr-vasive passion for puerile pranks will immediately take to these frisky feline follies, but the younger set is likely to hang on to these simple gameplay hooks for a lot longer.

The Katamari series inspired this cute, contained adventure, but it reminds me more of Elebits, the Wii's gleeful destruction simulator. You leap, swat and chomp your way through tons of fun locations, each with their own themes. There are no enemies to fear or other threats to manage. The only thing that can stop you is your cat-accurate love of naps! (Fun fact from the game: Cats spend about 70% of their lives asleep!)

You start each level with a certain amount of energy. Every jump, scratch and bite drains some of your spunk, though you can get a bit back by snacking on treats, eating plants or having a quick lie-down in a safe spot, like on top of the refrigerator.

Each stage also has its own set of goals, like catching mice and destroying dinosaur bones, but no matter where you are, you're always encouraged to push stuff over. You can also rip curtains for bonuses that boost your stats, eat catnip for a trippy surprise and knock down pictures of real-life cats. The more photos you topple, the more playable cats you can unlock, almost all of which are based on pets the creator of the game knew in real life. (One exception is "Fart Cat," a cartoon kitty that can pass gas with the push of a button.)

Most of these features were present in the original version of Catlateral Damage that was released in 2013. Back then, mostly non-violent games about funny animals were a new thing. Goat Simulator and Untitled Goose Game didn't exist yet. Realistic shooters that aped Hollywood action movies were everywhere. It was a lot easier for a cute little game about breaking dishes and opening sock drawers to stand out.

Now in 2021, Catlateral Damage is better than ever, with improved graphics and new features like a procedural generation mode, but in an overcrowded market, it's not as likely to make headlines. That said, in my household, it quickly joined Gato Roboto, PUSS!, Dig Dog, Cat Girl Without Salad and (weirdly enough) No More Heroes III among our list of the most animal-appreciating, well-playing games on the Switch.

While some of the challenges have been too tough for my 5-year-old to tackle on his own, he never gets tired of trying. He's actually playing the game right now as I write this, laughing at Fart Cat's flatulence and working hard to find a key to a new stage.

There may not be enough friction to keep adults entertained for weeks on end. The novelty is sure to charm cat lovers of any age, but for the younger crowd, mastering the 3D platforming and managing all the adorable mischief will be a perfect fit. **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MANEKOWARE RATING: E

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEVELOPER: ZOINK! GAMES
RATING: E10+

8.5

Roll with the Dice

LOST IN RANDOM

IN ITS TRAILERS, this game looks like a platforming RPG card battler board game. But it's none of those things! Zoink's Lost in Random is an adventure story with gaming elements, and what a meaningful rollercoaster of a story it tells!

Once you take control of the main character, Even, you're immediately thrust into a twisted world with a Coraline/Dark Crystal/Nightmare Before Christmas vibe. It's gorgeous and horrific at the same time, but may be too scary for younger kids.

Characters that aren't humans are outlandish and fascinatingly odd. Some speak English and some speak gibberish, which is also weird, and there seem to be several species that are all intermingled in the world. Characterization, voice work and writing are above and beyond here, and I couldn't wait to see what kind of creature I'd meet next.

The plot revolves around a Queen who decides fates on 12th birthdays. Even's sister Odd rolls the fated black die to see where she ends up in Random, and is taken away to be a Sixer by the Queen's right-hand hench-monstrosity, Nanny Fortuna. It doesn't sit well with Even, and the next night she's visited by a ghost she believes is her sister. Following the ghost has her leaving Onecroft via junker ship to start her adventure. Following a series of mishaps, she ends up in the forgotten Valley of Dice and finds her companion, Dicey.

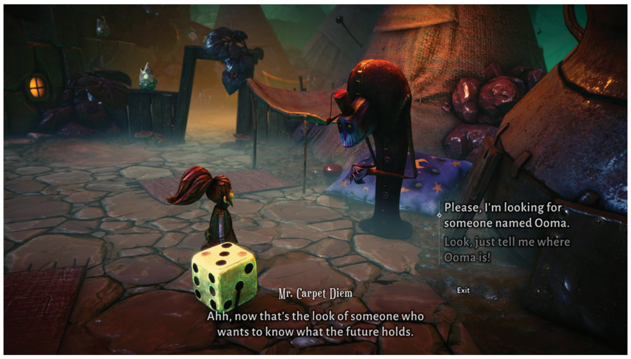
The combat is unlike anything I've played before. You start with a weak slingshot in every round, hunting down crystals that are on the ground or found on enemies that Dicey then scoops up to activate himself. Once full, you roll Dicey and that determines how many card markers you can play. Each card Even finds or buys has a marker "price," and this is how she creates weapons, heals, creates stage hazards and changes rules.

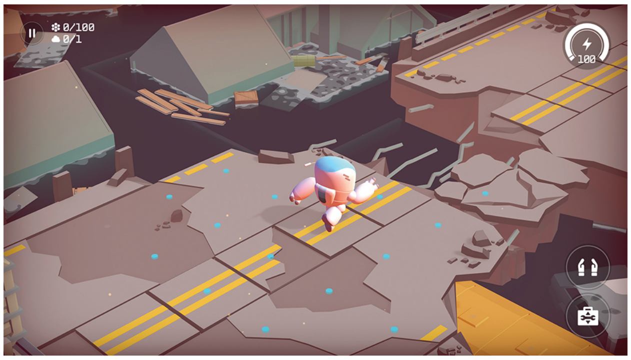
Starting so vulnerable in each round and then becoming powerful never got old. It's brilliant, challenging and an absolute joy to strategize with the cards randomly dealt to you. If it gets too tough, the game allows the difficulty to be toned down at any time, and it does a balanced job of steadily getting tougher by introducing new enemies, elements or twists to keep it fresh.

Sometimes you're helping a game piece reach the end of a board, or you're playing against an imaginatively designed boss battle, or you're just battling your way through the different lands. Two-Town's duality, Threedom's war, Fourberg's injustices, Fivetropolis' factories and finally Sixtopia: the Queen's domain.

The game isn't without problems, though. Immediately noticeable is a jarring framerate that can make traversal and just looking around tough. The game can't seem to handle itself at times, and it even crashed, forcing me to back out and reboot once. The shot delay can be annoying until you practice with it, and since your character can't jump I ended up hung up by small floor variations or bad camera placement often. Money becomes largely irrelevant by the fourth area and card types get stagnant by then too.

This can be overlooked because not meeting characters like Royam, Seemore, Mannie Dex, Neeshka and Ooma would be a shame. This tale is less about rescuing Odd, and more about Even's emotional and mental journey. The game's an oblectament – a word meaning delight! **— BRETT**





Plant Life Preserver

DOOMSDAY VAULT

7.0

WHEN YOU THINK of a game called Doomsday Vault, the word "pleasant" probably isn't the first one that comes to mind. But that's exactly how I would describe my time with this game.

As the title implies, it's the end of the world and just about all plant life on Earth is gone. It's up to you to scavenge the ruined planet for seeds that you can take back to your vault and grow into healthy plants.

Each level's primary objective is to find one specific seed, but along the way you'll also encounter small boxes that can be placed on power generators to purify the air, and various containers of all-important nutrients that allow even more plants to grow from the seeds you collect. Neither are necessary to complete your mission, but they are fun to seek out.

As you advance in your journeys, you'll gain new abilities like placing explosives and manipulating electricity that will allow you access to new areas – but everything is strictly about traversal, as there's no combat in the game whatsoever. In order to survive the scorched Earth, your character wears a bulky, fragile space suit. You take damage if you fall too far, you can't survive under water very long and there are even a handful of instant-death traps just waiting to be triggered.

The toughest challenge definitely comes in the form of the stealth segments where you have to avoid a series of drones and lasers, but they never become so difficult as to stop you from having fun. This is mostly because there's no penalty for death, and checkpoints are extremely generous. By the time I started dying somewhat frequently, I rarely lost much progress, which kept the whole thing feeling delightfully low stakes.

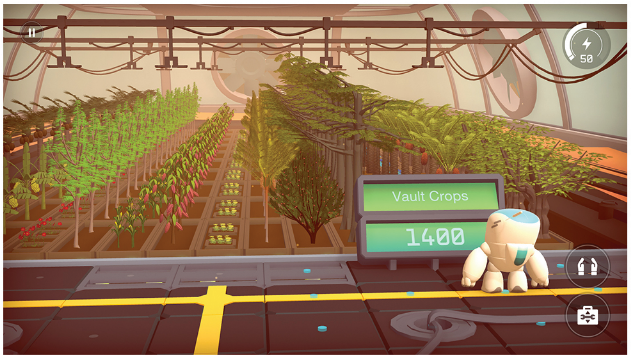
It only took me about four hours to 100% complete the story mode, which sounds a bit on the short side, but there are plenty of other little things that can keep you busy. A series of challenges with online leaderboards to run through is available, as is a simple-yet-addictive character customization mode.

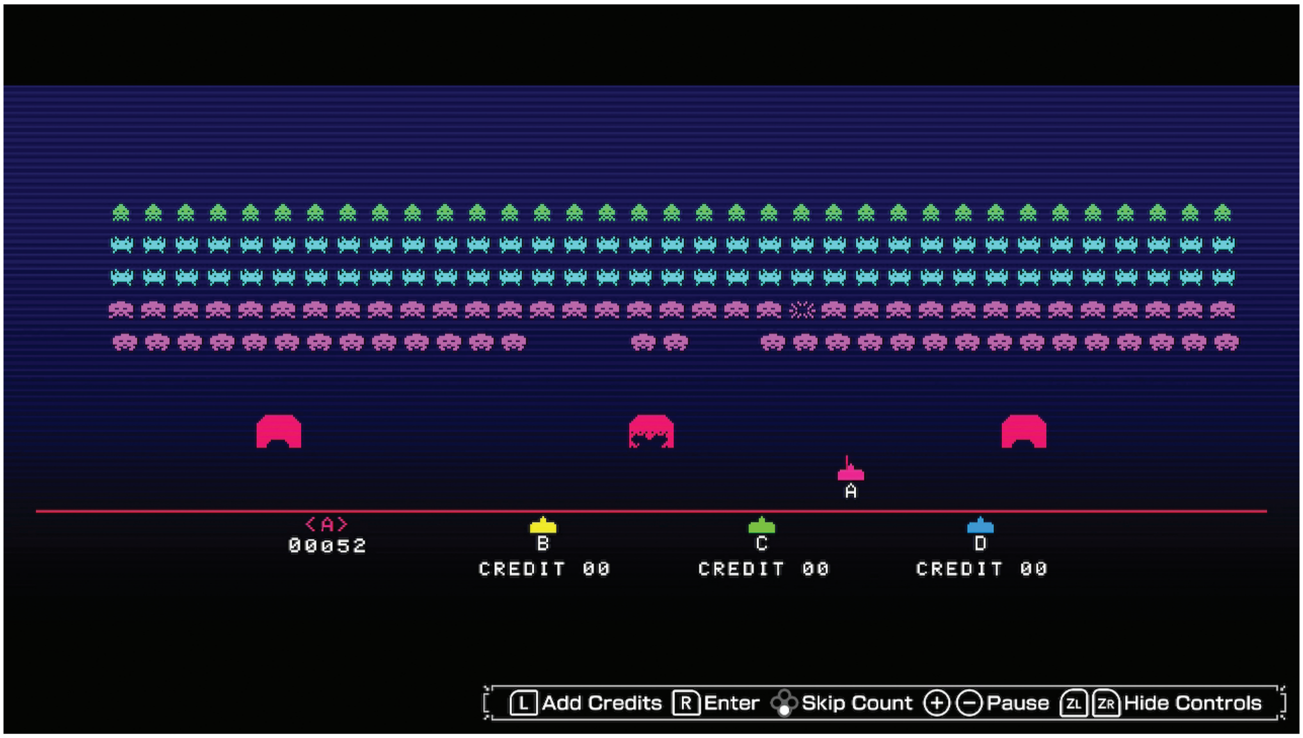
On the negative side, the controls have some issues. Everything is grid-based, and you move one square at a time. That stiffness honestly works for the calculated nature of the game's puzzles, but the problem comes with the actual execution of your commands. Since everything takes place at a 45-degree isometric angle, the default directions you have to press to move can be very counterintuitive, especially if you grew up playing games like Snake Rattle 'N Roll or Super Mario RPG. Fortunately there is an option to rotate the control inputs, which helps significantly, but even still, movement can often be frustratingly clunky, especially when you need to do things in a hurry.

When you complete the main campaign, the game tells you to expect new levels and challenges in the future, though nothing extra has been added as of this writing. Even with the amount of content available right now, though, it's a pretty solid value.

If you're a fan of environmental puzzles, Doomsday Vault makes traversing the post-apocalypse surprisingly relaxing and, well, downright pleasant. **– KRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: FLIGHTLESS RATING: E





They Came from Outer Space!

SPACE INVADERS INVINCIBLE COLLECTION

METROID DREAD, Axiom Verge 2, No More Heroes III . . . we have Space Invaders to thank for all of them. First released in arcades in 1978, it was one of the first video games with real pacing: the tension mounting through each round of ever-threatening extraterrestrials. The simple shapes of each UFO foe became international icons. The streamlined-but-constant action is easy to pick up and hard to put down.

Or at least, it was 43 years ago.

I'm old enough to have played Space Invaders shortly after it was first released, and I remember being very impressed. I don't feel that way anymore. Space Invaders and its seriously similar direct sequel just aren't that fun. It's not that they're bad; there's just not enough to them to keep you engaged. They're essential parts of gaming history, but they're about as satiating as a dinner of lukewarm tap water and three grains of white rice.

The existence of this whole collection is similarly dissatisfying. Less than a year ago, ININ Games published Space Invaders Forever on Switch. It has three games for $30. This Invincible Collection has those same three titles, plus eight more, for $60. That's a better deal, but those who bought the earlier release are sure to feel flimflammed.

The good news is, on the whole, this compilation is a hoot. Super Space Invaders '91 and Majestic Twelve: The Space Invaders Part IV are nice "newer but still old" iterations of the franchise, with tough-as-nails boss fights and some very '80s "protect the cows from alien mutilation" bonus rounds. I also had a great time with Space Cyclone, an unfairly hard stationary shmup in which aliens jump off of clouds and try to build killer spaceships, as well as Lunar Rescue, where this time it's you trying to get a space shuttle off the ground before dodging aliens on your way back to the cosmos.

But the real "stars" of this compilation are the same three titles that are also in the Forever release. First up is Arkanoid vs. Space Invaders. Originally a mobile title, it's only playable in Handheld Mode. That's not great! It's also got a certain low-budget feel to it, but it certainly makes good on its promise of mixing Space Invaders' blasting together with Arkanoid's brick breaking. Space Invaders Gigamax 4 SE is a fun four-player version of the game that was designed for massive arcade screens. Playing it on a standard TV is still fun, but it's clear something was lost in the scale-down. Finally, we've got Space Invaders Extreme, a DS title ported to Steam, and now Switch. It's great! Playing it gives me the feeling I got from the original Space Invaders back when it was new and exciting, and resurrecting four-decade-old childhood memories is no small achievement.

The Space Invaders Invincible Collection is not invulnerable to criticism. If Space Invaders Get Even, the now-lost WiiWare exclusive, had managed to make it on board, it would be a different story. As it stands, it's your best game-per-dollar value on Switch when it comes to Space Invaders collections . . . but don't be surprised if that doesn't stay true for long! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ININ GAMES
DEVELOPER: TAITO
RATING: E

7.0

Mesmerizing Mazes

LABYRINTH CITY: PIERRE THE MAZE DETECTIVE

MY EYESIGHT AIN'T what it used to be. I just got a new pair of glasses, actually, and playing Labyrinth City: Pierre the Maze Detective instantly put them to the test. Want to know if your own vision correction prescription might need to be updated? This game's better than any optometrist's eye charts!

Right around 30 years ago, a book series called Where's Waldo? was all the rage around the world. It was an illustrated children's puzzle book collection, and each installment was packed with big two-page spread cartoon crowd scenes. The images were just overflowing with people, and the task was to try to find the titular Waldo hiding among them all.

Pierre the Maze Detective came along just about six years ago, and it's a new book series that revives a lot of the old Waldo vibe. The big difference is that the huge illustrations in the Pierre books are all elaborate labyrinths – you're given a starting point, then you use your finger to trace a pathway through all the ups, downs, twists, turns and dead ends along the way to the goal. Each book is packed with character and heart.

And now the first book in the Pierre series has been "ported" to Nintendo Switch! This is a video game version of the book experience – all the illustrations have been made fully interactive, as you get to actually move Pierre himself through the crowded scenes, interact with objects along the way, gather up hidden treasures and ultimately try to catch the villainous Mr. X.

It is pure joy. Truly – I'm hard-pressed to recall any other games I've ever played that are so full of delight and whimsy! If you ever tried to use your imagination to bring the illustrations of any children's book to life when you were younger, that's what this is. They did it. It's static, still, two-dimensional crowd scenes so brilliantly awakened with activity that it's honestly amazing.

Even better? The music that plays in the background as you explore! Again, it's like it was refined from some deposit of pure happiness that the developers dug up from the base of a mountain of merriment. And yet it never strays into being too sweet – this isn't like the long-reviled "It's a Small World" song from Disneyland. It manages to stay perfectly jovial and perfectly listenable all while you're playing. And on a technical level, it impresses as well – it fades instruments in and out dynamically, altering the song in response to the progress you make in each maze.

The only limitation on Labyrinth City is its gameplay, which is understandably light. You simply guide Pierre around the scenes at a slow pace, pressing A to interact with objects and other characters (in TV Mode) or touching the screen to do the same (in Handheld Mode). There is almost no challenge beyond, as I mentioned at the beginning, simply testing the accuracy of your eyesight. Even then, though, there are never any critical elements that are too small to see – you'll just get a better look at all of the intricate details in each scene if you've got true 20/20.

I'm so pleased that this game now exists, and that it may open the door to further video game conversions of great children's books full of imaginative art. If you're in need of a bit of wholesomeness, look here! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: PIXMAIN
DEVELOPER: DARJEELING
RATING: E

9.0

Love in a Haunted Mansion

THE HOUSE IN FATA MORGANA: DREAMS OF THE REVENANTS EDITION

SWITCH PUBLISHER: LIMITED RUN GAMES DEVELOPER: NOVECTACLE RATING: M

AS A GAME, The House in Fata Morgana is much like the titular cursed house you find yourself in while you play.

You, as an amnesiac spirit, appear inside the house, seeking to figure out the secrets hidden within, and why you're suddenly there. But just like this spirit remains trapped in the house, what you find out about this place and its inhabitants will stick in your mind long after you've turned off your Switch.

As a visual novel, Fata Morgana's story is the focus here, and it's a dense one. As this spirit, you must explore the house and open doors to gain information and learn about people who lived there during different time periods.

Each door brings you closer to truth of what's really going on, but unfortunately, the first few you open, which comprise the first six to seven hours of the game, were its weakest part for me.

Partly, it's because there is little interactivity in these beginning hours. You're watching stories unfold as a bystander with no agency. Allowing players to move freely throughout the house and encounter the different residents at their own pace could have helped.

It's also because what I saw in one of these early doors made me consider quitting the game because the content was so violent and disturbing. I want to preface that Fata Morgana explores several dark subjects including murder, torture, physical and emotional abuse, racism, incest and sexual assault.

I think only adults should play this, and I'm mentioning it because I wish I had known a bit more of what to expect before I started.

All that said, Fata Morgana's story hits its stride after these first doors. You find out who this spirit is and why you're in the house. You're able to explore the house. You make choices that can lead to several endings. Most importantly, you find moments of hope and happiness in this story, amidst all its despair.

I don't want to say any more about the plot itself, but just know that despite my complaints above, I am happy I saw this game through and made it to the end. It is worth the time spent.

Fata Morgana's story is enhanced by the gripping atmosphere it creates with its beautiful music and visuals. The soundtrack features songs that fit the different time periods, helping you feel more immersed as the setting shifts to the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Other tracks take on a more timeless feel and play when certain characters are together, which I thought was a nice touch as you learned more about them.

The art is beautiful, from the characters to the house and environments you see around it. The characters' designs are especially detailed, allowing them to stand out against many of the game's backdrops. Visually, the game also uses flashes of color and text to build suspense and dread in certain scenes.

The House in Fata Morgana released on Switch in April with its Dreams of the Revenants Edition, including the main game along with a prequel and sequel. I think fans of gothic literature, visual novels and/or engrossing stories will find something to love about this game. Just know that if you start it, you've got to reach the end to really appreciate what it has to offer. **— MAGGIE**

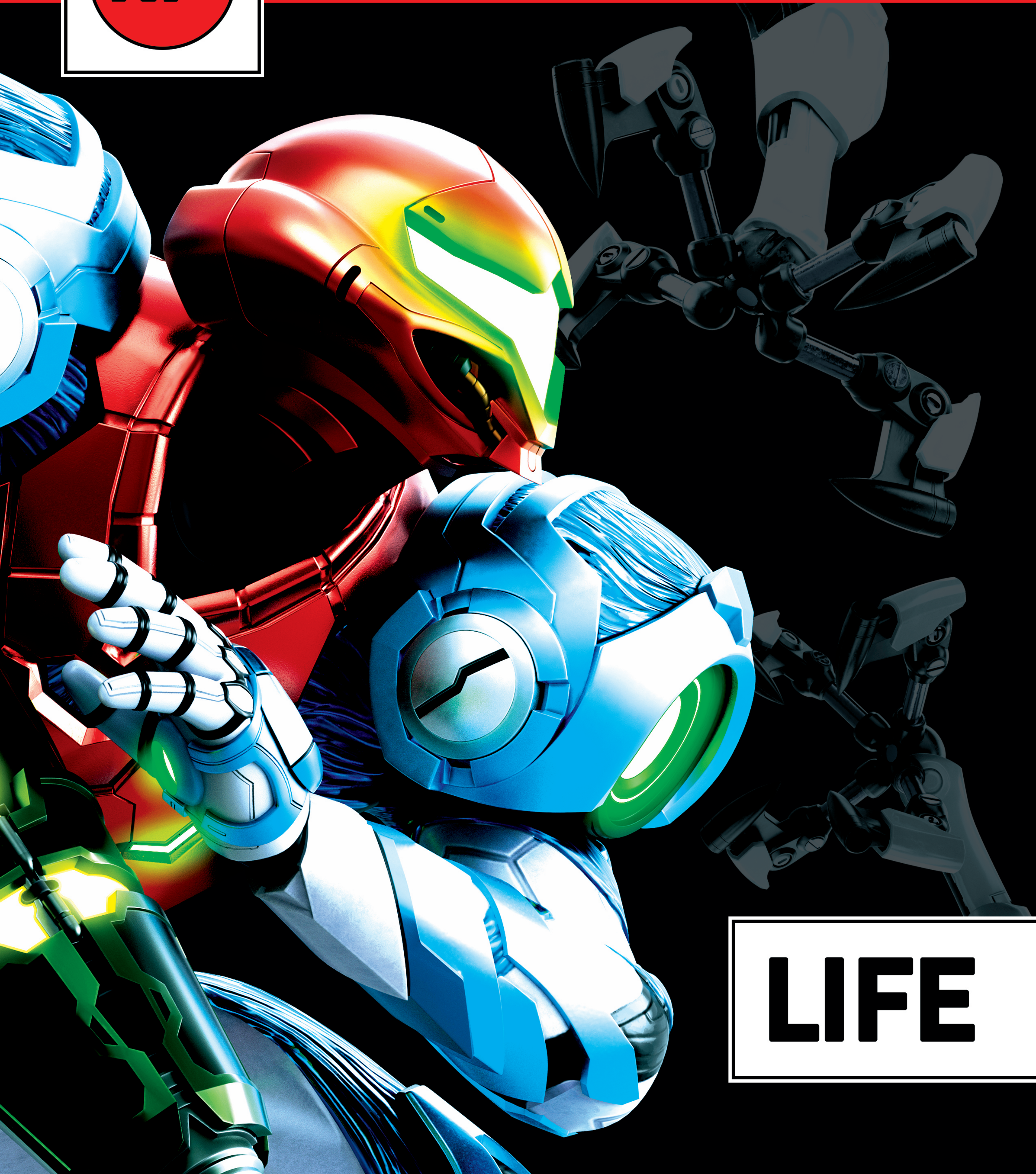
8.5

REST O

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING



LIFE

IN THE SHADOWS

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

ALL BY HERSELF

IMAGINE YOURSELF ALONE.

Imagine yourself alone, in the dark.

Imagine yourself alone in the dark, lost, somewhere miles beneath the surface of an alien world, surrounded on all sides by ravenous creatures moving in to tear you apart. Imagine never knowing if you'll ever see the sun again.

This is a normal day in the life of Samus Aran. This is a life lived in the shadows.

It was 35 years ago when the world first met this mysterious armored warrior in Nintendo's original science fiction spectacle, Metroid. Unlike later installments in what would become a decades-spanning series, that first game offered no context to its striking opening visual. Here was a lone fighter, stranded in a subterranean chamber, instantly encountering creeping enemies without even first having a chance to move.

There was no spaceship landing sequence. No elevator or door or even a hole in the ceiling to offer any explanation of how this scenario set itself up. This was just Samus. Alone in the dark. The mission: survive.

Nintendo's all-new science fiction spectacle for 2021, Metroid Dread, presents itself as the pinnacle of this experience. In many ways it's more of a horror story than a sci-fi one . . . so how did we get to that point? How did the series build that feeling of dread over the decades?

The answer's simple, really: It's been there from the beginning.

Each installment in the Metroid saga has emphasized its underlying fear factor to different degrees, tapping into a variety of approaches to chill its players' spines as they play. The one tool that's been used again and again, though, is fusing the two fears that are so universal to being human.

Being alone. And being in the dark.

That isn't the full formula, of course. The reason the Metroid series succeeds is that it starts at that point of powerlessness, but it doesn't stay there.

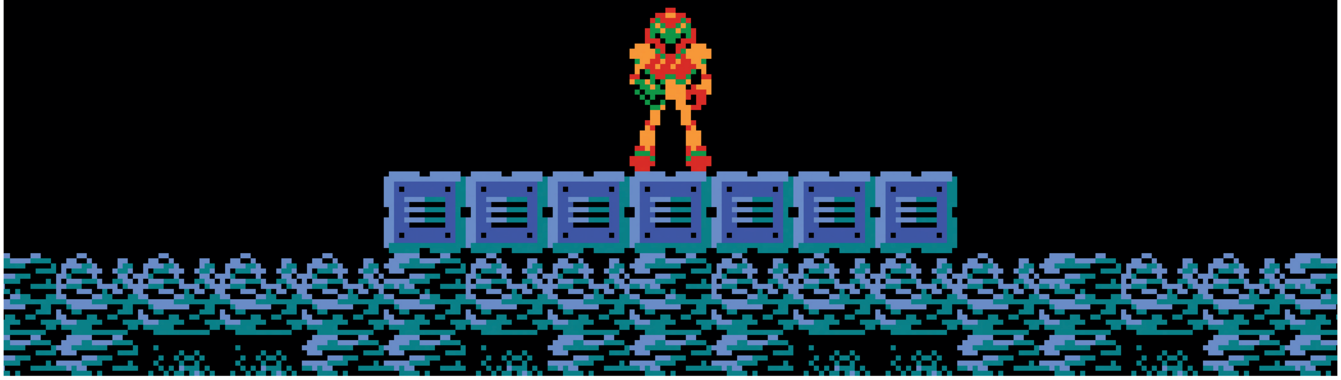
Samus is no less alone and no less surrounded by shadows at the end of her adventures than at the beginning – but she gains more power over time. She grows. She develops into more and more of a capable fighter as she explores deeper and deeper into the depths of whatever planet or space station or fractured reality she finds herself stranded in, and she herself becomes an object of fear for any enemies in her way.

Imagine yourself alone in the dark, surrounded on all sides by ravenous creatures moving in to tear you apart . . . but you're equipped with a fully charged Power Suit, armed to the teeth with Missiles, Bombs and Beams and fully confident in your ability to blast your way through anything foolish enough to oppose you. Suddenly the shadows don't loom quite so large.

Samus' isolation is iconic twice over, as it both sets the stage for her journey to feel intimidating at first, but then also lays the perfect foundation for players to feel empowered over time. Yes, she's alone. And yes, that's scary. But she never wavers. She moves forward. She always achieves victory even with every odd stacked against her.

Her stalwart silence – the calm, unbreaking courage that was naturally ascribed to her character by players of her first games – might not have been there if Metroid, as a series, had gotten its start any later than it did. Later sequels have an awful lot of talking. Large casts of supporting characters. Cutscenes in which Samus acts at odds with the bravery she'd been known for before. It's one big reason why 2010's Metroid: Other M is so reviled by fans – it didn't star the Samus we knew. The warrior who was defined by the darkness. Who faced the shadows with no assistance, never complaining.

Thank goodness for the limited technology of the '80s. Nintendo had no choice but to present a hero who was alone in the dark, and 35 years later we're all better for it.



THE STORY SO FAR

HAVING ESTABLISHED OUR protagonist, let's revisit her adventures — the core four that have comprised the primary Metroid story so far, for starters.

Though her first game offered no story whatsoever once the action began, letting the title screen sit for a few seconds did activate a brief text description of Samus' mission. It read:

EMERGENCY ORDER: Defeat the Metroid of the Planet Zebeth and destroy the Mother Brain, the mechanical life vein. GALAXY FEDERAL POLICE M510

Its misspelling of Zebes aside, this did sum up Metroid 1 fairly well. Samus Aran is a bounty hunter who's been hired by the Galactic Federation. Her objective is to travel to Zebes and hunt down two different targets: the Metroid and the Mother Brain. The bit about the Brain being a "life vein" even foreshadows the ending escape sequence in the adventure's final moments: When Mother Brain is no more, something critical is going to happen!

Players who wanted a bit more backstory could turn to the game's instruction manual. It explained that the titular Metroid was a creature recently discovered on the ecologically devastated Planet SR388. Federation researchers captured a lone specimen, postulating that its species was the cause of the environmental collapse on SR388 due to its ability to drain the life force out of other organisms. But before they could study it further, their research vessel was attacked by Space Pirates! The Pirates stole the Metroid, took it to their hideout deep within Zebes and began plans to multiply it. With any army of Metroids to use as biological weapons, the Pirates could take over the galaxy!

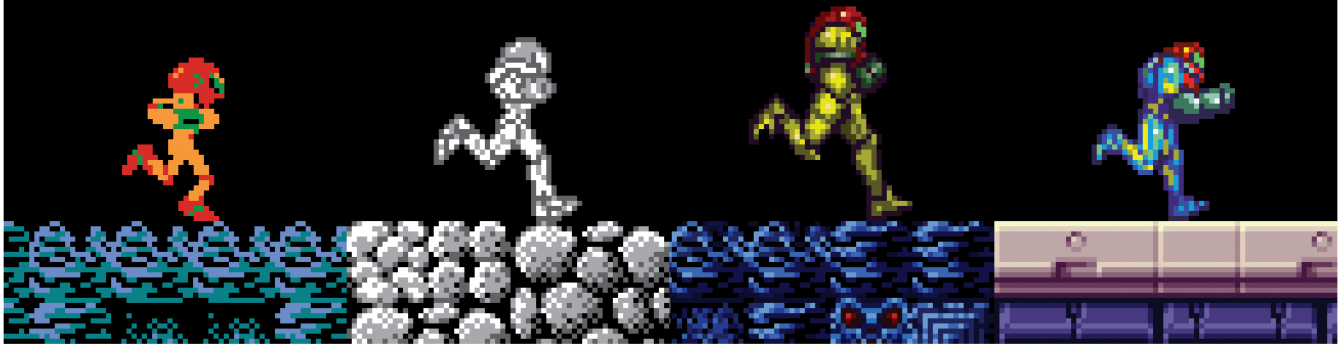
Knowing their normal police force was no match for the Pirates, Samus — already a well-regarded bounty hunter by that time — was hired to infiltrate the fortress, take out the Metroid (and any clones the Pirates had already managed to make) and also blast their Mother Brain, in hopes that the resulting chain reaction would eliminate the Pirate menace for good. And Samus did so! She accomplished exactly that mission. She won!

But the story was just getting started. Years later, the Federation determined that Metroids as a species were just too dangerous to be allowed to live. So Samus was hired again and given a new assignment: travel to Planet SR388, the Metroids' homeworld, and eliminate every last living member of their species.

Again, she did so. Throughout Metroid II: Return of Samus, she explored the caverns of SR388 and did battle with multiple Metroids — even discovering that they could grow and evolve into larger, more dangerous forms when left to thrive in the wild! But still she succeeded, killing every last one of them.

. . . Well, not *every* last one. Samus took pity on a Baby Metroid she discovered after killing the Metroid Queen, letting it live and bringing it to a new team of Federation researchers. History just repeated itself, though. Those researchers were also attacked by Space Pirates — led by the monstrous Ridley — and the Baby was stolen, taken back to Zebes and again forced to multiply to make a new Metroid army. Through the adventure of Super Metroid, Samus embarked on a second quest through the depths of Zebes and faced off against intimidating foes like Phantoon, Draygon, a new enormous version of Metroid 1 boss Kraid, Ridley once more and finally a rebuilt (or regrown?) Mother Brain. She defeated them all — but the Baby sacrificed itself in the final battle to save Samus, so as our hero fled the exploding planet, it seemed like all the Metroids in the galaxy were finally all gone.

That proved to be a problem. It turns out that the absence of the predatory Metroids on Planet SR388 unleashed an outbreak of their even more deadly prey species: the X Parasites. Samus herself became infected on a return trip there, and was only able to survive thanks to receiving a vaccine created from the Baby Metroid's DNA! Thus, Samus herself became part Metroid in the fourth mainline Metroid game, Metroid Fusion. Her Power Suit adapted to her altered body, wildly changing its shape, and she gained the Metroids' power to absorb the energy of the X Parasites — but also their weakness to extreme cold. It didn't prevent her from accomplishing her latest mission, though: Destroying an outbreak of X in a huge space station, and ultimately taking out Planet SR388 entirely, like Zebes before it!



THE PRIME TIMELINE

DARKNESS NEVER DESCENDS *too* severely in the core four Metroid games. Sure, the backgrounds of the first two are pure black for the most part, and there are moments in Super when blasting some alien fireflies can leave Samus stranded in the shadows – but being sidescrollers, each of those games has to keep the hero visible on the screen for the gameplay to function. It would take a total change in perspective to change that!

Metroid Prime arrived on November 17, 2002, and it brought to the Metroid series a total change in perspective. No longer seen from the side, Samus instead disappeared behind the camera, as Prime gave players a first-person view – your eyes and Samus' became one in the same. You saw what she saw.

And sometimes that wasn't much! Metroid Prime boldly dared to totally turn off the lights, leaving players nearly sightless at one critical point in the quest. Samus had never felt so alone in the dark as that! Thankfully, brave players who pushed through could find a new visor upgrade that restored her vision.

Moments like that were so powerfully immersive that more first-person Metroids soon followed. "Metroid Prime" became not just the name of a single spin-off, but its own brand name, applied to the games that used the in-the-visor view – and that also took place in their own piece of the timeline within the core four.

Every Metroid Prime game – so far, at least – chronologically takes place in the years in-between the end of Metroid 1 and the beginning of Metroid II. In Prime 1, Samus finds herself exploring Tallon IV, a planet poisoned by a mysterious fallen meteor. Samus discovers that the meteor contained a substance known as Phazon – incredibly toxic, but also useful for enhancing the strength of creatures who find a way to infuse themselves with its energy. Those creatures? Samus' old enemies, the Space Pirates, who also happened to bring more Metroids to the party too. Our hero defeats them all, of course, but the final foe – the Metroid Prime itself – steals some of Samus' essence in the end.

A side story, Metroid Prime Hunters, came next. It chronicled Samus' battles against six rival bounty hunters – but only one of them, Sylux, has since been seen again.

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes picked up the primary Prime story after that, reintroducing the Metroid Prime in its new identity-thieving form: Dark Samus! Our hero battled her dark doppelgänger multiple times while exploring the split reality of a planet called Aether, which had itself been divided into Light and Dark forms. Being a light in the darkness had always been an underlying theme for the Metroid series, but Prime 2 just dove straight into it, giving Samus literal Light and Dark Suits along the way, too!

The final fight against Phazon seemed to happen in Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, as Samus fought back against an infection of the toxin in her body, fought Dark Samus once more and then managed to blow up another whole planet: Phaaze, the source of all Phazon. 2016's Federation Force briefly made Samus a bad guy (but she got better), and now we're waiting for the next chapter to be revealed . . . in the highly anticipated Metroid Prime 4! Will it stay in the pre-Metroid II part of the timeline, or venture beyond? For now, Nintendo's still keeping us in the dark.

A HUNTED HUNTER

VICTORY'S NEVER ASSURED.

Though Samus Aran builds up her arsenal and turns herself into a nearly unstoppable killing machine by the end of each of her adventures, she sometimes still encounters situations – and uniquely powerful enemies – that outmatch her along the way. Sometimes she has no choice but to run. Sometimes the hunter becomes the hunted!

Super Metroid opened with the series' first unwinnable battle: When Samus encounters Ridley in that game's intro sequence, she can try to attack him, but she can never defeat him. He always escapes, carrying the kidnapped Baby Metroid in his claws. Samus has no choice but to take the loss and pursue him.

That was nothing compared to what came next, though. Ridley was defeatable in his second confrontation with Samus in Super, so his intimidation factor faltered after just that first scene. In the following game, though, Samus had to contend with a foe who couldn't be killed throughout nearly the entire game!

Metroid Fusion was the game that really began to bring a true sense of dread into the Metroid series. It introduced the SA-X – an X Parasite that managed to latch onto pieces of Samus' old Power Suit and transform itself into a fully villainous clone of Samus' fully powered former self! In her new Fusion Suit, made from Metroid DNA, the true Samus was uniquely susceptible to the Metroid-killing armanents she herself had amassed in the past. Samus became the very thing she'd always hunted, and an echo of her past life was simply operating as she'd always done before: finding "a Metroid" and working to kill it.

Gameplaywise, encounters with the SA-X in Metroid Fusion were palpably tense. If it saw you, you'd have to run for your life and find a place to hide – your weapons couldn't stop it. To avoid those chase sequences, you'd often have to employ stealth to try to slip past the SA-X without it detecting you! It was a total shift in playstyle for the Metroid series, and it worked beautifully well in support of the "search action" that remained as the core of the adventure.

Two years after Fusion, Metroid: Zero Mission extended the story of Metroid 1 by having Samus crash back down on Zebes after beating Mother Brain. In doing so, she lost her Power Suit entirely! Left with nothing but her Zero Suit and a weak zapper gun, she had to turn to stealth again to sneak her way through a Space Pirate ship on the surface and find a way to reclaim her full arsenal once again. The tension of being surrounded by foes that couldn't be defeated – only slowed down – and being forced to flee again increased the dread factor in the franchise.

Now, 17 years after Zero Mission, we're finally on the verge of seeing the true Dread gameplay the Metroid team was building toward so long ago. Samus better get ready to run again!

KNOW THE CHOZO

BLAME THE BIRDS!

As you play more and more Metroid games, witness Samus blast more and more actual Metroids and see her forced to detonate entire planets multiple times, you might begin to ask yourself why. How did this galaxy get so twisted, and why is it that this one bounty hunter is always the person called upon to untangle every mess?

Blame the Chozo. An ostensibly benevolent space-faring race of bird-like people, the Chozo are almost always the cause of, and solution to, all of Samus' problems.

Decades before Samus was born, the Chozo spread their wings (so to speak) and established colonies across nearly every world we've mentioned already: Zebes, SR388, Tallon IV and many, many more. But though their civilizations were seemingly advanced, even enlightened, they've all come to ruin by the time Samus becomes an adult.

Though we've never been given full explanations of the circumstances that led to every Chozo colony's ultimate downfall, the fate of one in particular has been revealed: SR388. There, the Chozo who first settled the planet had a problem: an overpopulation of the native X Parasites. Their solution? Bio-engineering a new predator to eat them. The Chozo . . . made the Metroids.

It wasn't a good idea. They lost control of their creations, and the Metroids overran not only the X Parasites, but also all other local species — and then they came for their creators. The Chozo of SR388 were either killed or forced to flee back to the stars by the work of their own talons.

A pattern of similar missteps emerged on other worlds, leading to a galaxy filled with Chozo ruins — places this same species had once settled with the best intentions, but where ultimately something went terribly wrong.

The Chozo did get one thing right, though.

When a group of Space Pirates led by the bloodthirsty Ridley attacked a human colony on Planet K-2L, only one little girl survived: 3-year-old Samus Aran. A group of Chozo arrived after the raid and rescued her, took her in, raised her as one of their own and ultimately gifted her with her signature Power Suit — the pinnacle of Chozo technological achievement. She was even infused with Chozo DNA! (Which means, if you're keeping score, Samus is now part human, part Chozo and part Metroid.)

Her upbringing prepared her to be a warrior, and extra weapon and armor upgrades left behind by the Chozo — held aloft by Chozo Statues — have assisted her in her missions ever since. But even then, not every Chozo seems to be Samus' ally . . .

BEYOND THE END

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The release of Metroid Dread marks an end point for the series. Multiple end points, really! It's being billed as "Metroid 5," the concluding chapter to the main story that has only had four installments for so long. It's the culmination of the gameplay that the sidescrolling side of the series has been building up for over 35 years. It may very well give us a chronologically final appearance of the Metroids, the Chozo, or both!

All of that is incredibly exciting, making Dread the single most important release under the overall "Metroid" umbrella in decades. But then, where does Metroid go afterward? Especially since Dread's shaping up to be such a huge sales success – what would an author do if, after 35 years of relatively meager sales of all their past books, the planned finale was the one that finally took off and hit the New York Times Best Sellers list? Well, they'd find a way to continue the story somehow!

Now, the promotion pinning Dread as Metroid's final chapter would be getting received with a lot more fear if we didn't already know that another game is already in development. Metroid Prime 4 has been in the works for over four years now. Though it was rebooted and changed developers halfway through that span of time, and though it still may be years away from release, we do know it's coming eventually. We know Samus isn't hanging up her helmet for good.

But that's the first-person side of the series. Will we ever get another sidescroller after Dread? Both Metroid and Metroid II received remakes several years after their original launches. Would Nintendo ever dare to remake Fusion? Or the masterpiece of Super Metroid? Those are the only two choices for further remakes, so if not them, any new sidescroller would have to host another original story.

And if we did get another original story, when would it take place in the timeline? We've waited 19 years to find out what happens in the future after Fusion. Could Samus' next tale take her past the events of Dread and into a galaxy that's finally free of Metroids, letting her fix her attention on another target for a change? Or there's the opposite approach: rewinding back to before the Galactic Federation was ever even aware of Metroids existing. Could we get a Samus story that focuses on her early adventures as a bounty hunter – one of the missions that built her reputation to begin with, so that she was the one that the Federation knew they should call when the Space Pirates of Zebes were too much for their police force to face?

Could we finally discover who the "Galaxy Federal Police M510" really were? Maybe "Metroid" will be dropped as the brand name going forward and Nintendo could just use "Federation Force" instead! People would love that, right? (I'm kidding!)

There's no definitive conclusion to reach, other than the fact that Metroid Dread marking an end point and shining such a bright new spotlight on the series means Samus' possibilities for the future are greater than ever before!

METROID DREAD

Samus faces her most intimidating enemies ever . . . with no fear!

IT'S HARD TO fully encapsulate the excitement of my reaction to Metroid Dread! That level of simultaneous shock and joy has happened so very few times in the past – moments when you're witnessing the reveal of a thing that you'd hoped for for so long that you'd actually stopped hoping for it long ago, sure that it would never actually happen. Sure that whoever had the power to make it happen must have simply forgotten.

Metroid Dread has been in development for over 16 years. That seems like such an extreme stretch of time, but it makes sense: Metroid Fusion was released in 2002, then Metroid: Zero Mission followed it up in 2004, so of course Nintendo would have wanted to keep their momentum going by officially beginning work on the next 2D Metroid title in 2005. It also wasn't surprising when first rumors of the existence of Metroid Dread began to appear in magazines and online at the end of '05 and heading into '06 – nothing too concrete, beyond the name, was known at the time, but Metroid fans were in no rush to know more. We'd just gotten Fusion and Zero Mission back-to-back, and the Prime series was seeing new sequels at the same time, so everyone was more than happy to wait until, say, the next E3 showcase to learn more about the mysterious "Dread."

Years went by. Metroid Dread never appeared at any E3 – or any other industry event. (Not for the public to see, anyway.) Rumors began to swirl that the game had been cancelled. Rumors that turned out to actually be true! In its initial form – the version that began development in 2005 – Metroid Dread was scrapped, as it was determined that the technology of the time wasn't up to the task of realizing the developers' vision. Later, in 2008 and 2009, work was restarted with a new development team at Nintendo Software Technology (the in-house American studio that had previously handled Metroid Prime Hunters), but that version, too, was cancelled, and again for the same reason. Series lead Yoshio Sakamoto had an image in his mind of what Metroid Dread was supposed to look like and how it was supposed to play, and neither the GBA nor the DS could achieve it. So, for the second time, Dread was dead.

But again, that was all happening behind the scenes. From the perspective of the fans, Metroid Dread was a whisper on the wind – a name that had floated up into public consciousness for a span of just a few months before floating away again and evaporating. A cheeky joke inserted into 2007's Metroid Prime 3: Corruption by the developers at Retro Studios poked a bit of fun at the situation and fans' expectations: Samus could scan a computer terminal in that game and see a message stating that experiments on "Metroid project Dread" had begun . . . while the next adjacent terminal claimed that those experiments had failed. That acknowledgement was enough to keep fan speculation fueled for several more years before hopes eventually died down once more.

And so it was that Metroid Dread essentially became a footnote in the history of the series. For the last decade in particular, it's hardly been brought up by anyone in the greater Nintendo fandom, especially since Metroid seemingly moved on and went in different directions.

But little did we know that 2017's Samus Returns was leading us to this moment! Seeing the skills of the development team at MercurySteam through their work on other series like Castlevania, Mr. Sakamoto thought

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: MERCURYSTEAM
RELEASE: OCTOBER 8, 2021 RATING: T

that they might be the ones who could finally bring Dread back to life. He'd never forgotten his ideas for "Metroid 5" nearly eight years after the cancellation of its second version! He wanted to work with this new team to finally bring his vision to life.

They just needed to have their mettle tested first. So rather than recruiting MercurySteam to work on Dread straight away, they were instead tasked with crafting a remake of Metroid II to prove their worth. Samus Returns, while criticized by some (including our Interview section guest later in this issue), demonstrated the style and gameplay feel that Mr. Sakamoto had always had in mind for Dread. So, after it launched, they got the greenlight to move ahead – and to finally move Samus' story ahead, 16 years after it was first planned to!

SAMUS' NEW MISSION

The events of Metroid Fusion followed Samus Aran's efforts to eradicate the insidious X Parasites, a species that possesses the power to infect and then perfectly copy the appearance and abilities of other living things. She believed she succeeded in this goal by causing the B.S.L. space station to crash into Planet SR388, destroying both locations known to host X populations. But as Metroid Dread begins, the Galactic Federation relays to our hero a worrying piece of intel they've recently received: more X Parasites may be alive and well on another distant world: Planet ZDR.

Knowing the X can attack and clone living creatures, the Federation sent a team of non-living robots to ZDR to verify the rumors and assess the threat. But that team of E.M.M.I. units – or Extraplanetary Multiform Mobile Identifiers – never reported back. The Federation then recruits Samus to travel to ZDR and investigate.

Metroid Dread is serving as a culmination of the 2D Metroid saga in many different ways, but one of the biggest is through its cast of characters. Our hero is hunting the X, her old foes from Fusion. She'll be opposed by the E.M.M.I. robots after she arrives – an all-new threatening force. But then she'll encounter many more enemies (and perhaps allies?) both old and new, including a bold return of the massive monster Kraid (last seen by us in 2004's Metroid: Zero Mission, but last seen chronologically by Samus in Super Metroid), as well as some actual Chozo warriors!

Living Chozo! Not Chozo Ghosts, who have fought Samus in the past. And not Chozo Statues coming to life to attack her for some reason – I've never understood the motivation behind that. But perhaps I'll come to understand why some members of the Chozo species don't seem too excited about assisting Samus here in Dread, because the first one she finds grabs her by the throat and blasts her at point-blank range!

That's slightly spoiler-ish, but only slightly, because that scene seems to play out in Dread's opening minutes. Samus' failed fight with a bird warrior who should see her as a friend leaves our hero fainted on the floor, and when she awakens, many of her armor and weapon upgrades have been lost. (Longtime Metroid fans know the drill by now! There's always got to be some reason why Samus' Power Suit gets powered down, so that each adventure can recreate the gameplay experience of starting off with nearly nothing but then growing in power over time.)

And so the full scope of Samus' new mission is set: Explore the new world of ZDR, rebuild her arsenal and find out the truth about the X Parasites, the E.M.M.I. units and the Chozo too!

THE FEELING OF DREAD

If putting the word straight into the name of the game didn't make it obvious enough, "dread" is the focus of this adventure. That looming sense of fear; that feeling that, at any moment, something could leap out of the shadows and grab you!

Nintendo's explicitly stated this aim, pointing directly to the stalking behavior of the SA-X in Metroid Fusion and the stealth sequence in Metroid: Zero Mission as the precise precursors to the gameplay set to be featured here. This time around, the E.M.M.I. robots are the hunters hunting our favorite bounty hunter. Though they should be on Samus' side, something has corrupted their programming and they now see her as a target to be eliminated. What's worse, they're impenetrable! Samus' normal set of weapons won't make a dent in their nearly invulnerable armor.

Thankfully, *nearly* invulnerable means that there is a way to defeat them – eventually. If Samus can evade capture long enough to locate the Central Units supplying the E.M.M.I. with energy, she can tap into that power flow to temporarily upgrade her Arm Cannon into the Omega Cannon! It can then unleash both an Omega Stream to peel away the E.M.M.I.'s armor and an Omega Blaster to finish the fight with one final burst. (The Central Units, by the way? They might just remind you of a certain old Mother . . .)

Avoiding the E.M.M.I. will be a huge part of the Metroid Dread experience. Another new upgrade will help to even the playing field, though: Samus' new Phantom Cloak. An invisibility power of sorts, it makes Samus imperceptible to the E.M.M.I. units' sensors – they won't be able to see or hear her when it's active, even if she's standing right in front of their, uh, "face." Using the Phantom Cloak drains Aeion energy, though, so it can't be used indefinitely. You'll have to manage your energy reserves well, tapping into the Cloak only when absolutely necessary! (Or use it all the time and live dangerously – it is a game, after all. Have fun.)

And in keeping with this being a game and with its overall goal being entertainment, anyone who's fearing these E.M.M.I. chases should be put at ease. Some games featuring unbeatable enemies that constantly hunt you down, like Capcom's Resident Evil 2 and its infamous Mr. X, keep players under constant tension. (I personally played Resident Evil 2 only up until the point when Mr. X was introduced, then ended my time with the game, since I didn't want to feel panicked.) Panic is minimized in Metroid Dread, though, by keeping the E.M.M.I. encounters contained entirely in E.M.M.I. Zones.

Unique doorways will signify when you're about to enter an E.M.M.I. Zone, so you can mentally prepare yourself and gather up your courage. The map screen will highlight the boundaries of the Zone and all of its entrances and exits, so you can make a plan for how to dash through undetected. You can then trust that the E.M.M.I. won't follow you past the marked limits of its defined area.

This, I think, is such a wise move by both Nintendo and MercurySteam. The Zero Mission stealth sequence was just one piece of that overall game, and encounters with the SA-X were not constant in Fusion. If Dread had these E.M.M.I. bots hassling Samus for the whole duration of her new mission, it would be tiresome, tedious and a total turn-off for fear-averse players who just want to explore.

Fingers crossed that the E.M.M.I. events feel perfectly balanced!

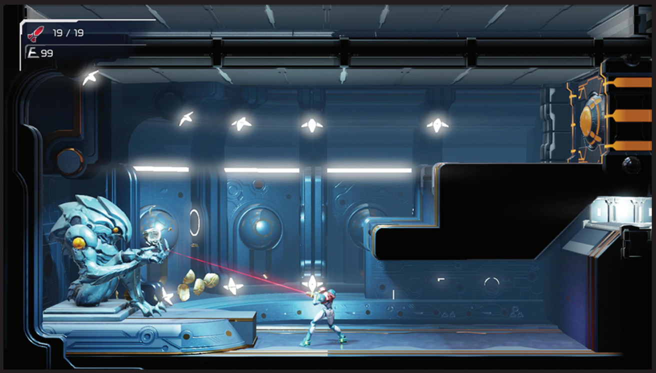
EXPLORING A NEW PLANET

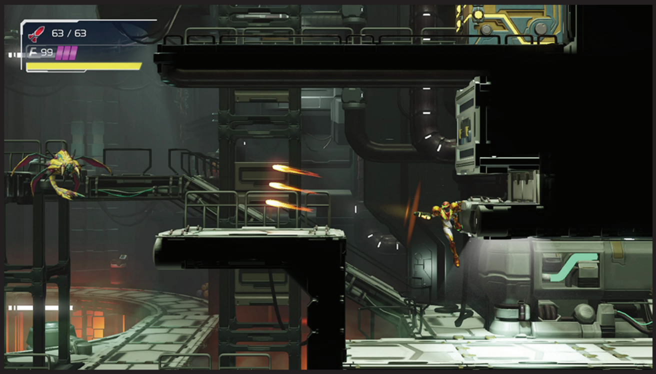
Fear is a core component here, but the game's name still has "Metroid" placed before "Dread," so you know exploring a vast, interconnected environment is really going to be the foundation of the experience.

Planet ZDR looks delightfully diverse, bringing more visual variety and a greater range of biomes than we may have ever seen contained within a single Metroid game in the past. All the hits are here, from crumbling ruins to areas flush with lush vegetation. Caverns filled with flowing lava and frozen zones encrusted with ice. Even a new underwater area – so you just know there's going to be an encore appearance of the Gravity Suit!

In case you're totally new to the Metroid series – and you might very well be, given the timing of this release and the fact that it's the first new home console launch in the series in ages – then its exploration, in a nutshell, is like peeling away the layers on an onion. At first, Samus came only reach a handful of different rooms on the map – she's stuck on the surface. But then she'll uncover a new upgrade for her weapons or armor systems that will grant her access to more areas. Then, exploring those new areas, she'll find another upgrade that will expand her range further, and so on and so forth until, at the end of the game, her fully powered-up Power Suit grants her free rein to visit any place she wants across the entire map.

Returning upgrades from old games feel like old friends to series veterans, and that nostalgia will kick in with Dread when Samus rediscovers classic items like the Grapple Beam, the Screw Attack and the Speed Booster. (And yes, Shinesparking is back too! Sequence breaking is back on the menu, friends.)





All-new items and abilities will set Dread apart from the past, though. Samus now has a Mega Man-like slide move to quickly slip under low walls without having to stop and change into her rolling Morph Ball mode. The Morph Ball's still here, though, and it gets new tricks up its sleeve (does it have sleeves?), like the Cross Bomb. It reminds me of Bomberman's bombs, as instead of exploding in just a small sphere around the spot where you drop it, it sends a plus sign-shaped explosion up, down, left and right across an extended range.

Also new? The speedy Phase Shift, a dodge maneuver that zips Samus forward or backward, can be used in mid-air as well as on the ground and can be strung together three times in rapid succession, if you so choose. It looks like the flashiest and most versatile new enhancement to Samus' overall agility — another clear goal of the Dread design team.

Samus is a human wearing a suit of robot armor, so it makes sense that her earliest games had her moving kind of slowly and clunkily. But I like the fact that her in-universe years of experience at being a bounty hunter and operating that suit have aligned with our real-world years of video game technology advancing and being able to depict her moving more fluidly within it. Even in the Smash series, "normal" Samus plods along, while Zero Suit Samus is the one who's fleet of foot. They may have to change that after this game!

Dread's Samus dashes, dodges, flips and fires faster than ever before. The revolutionary Free Aim introduced in Samus Returns — which allowed her to sweep her Arm Cannon around to target any direction in 360 degrees — is back too, but also enhanced further in order to support the goal of keeping Samus' momentum moving. Players no longer have to plant Samus' feet in one spot to activate the Free Aim — it can now be done on the fly, while moving!

Same thing with the Melee Counter move, also first seen four years ago on 3DS. It was a flow killer, as you had to stop, wait for a foe to be vulnerable, bop them, blast them, then run again. Then stop, wait for a foe to be . . . you get the idea. Counters can now be unleashed on the run, so you can just blaze through enemies' defenses and bash them in the face instead of waiting for them to be ready. Samus has places to be!

MYSTERIES ABOUND

Taken together, the intense tension the developers are able to achieve with the power of the Switch and the way Samus is now able to explore her surroundings faster and more capably than ever before make a strong case for Nintendo being right to wait this long to finally give us "Metroid 5." Sure, some of these gameplay and story ideas could have worked had the game pushed through as a DS project over a decade ago, but it just wouldn't have looked this good or flowed this well. Metroid Dread on the Switch almost feels like a souped-up remake of a game we actually got in 2006 in an alternate timeline!

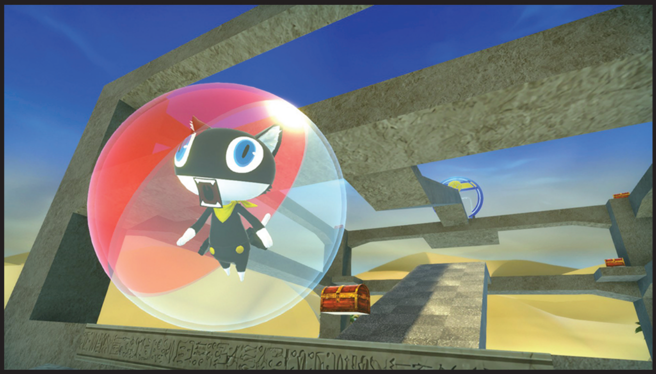
Beyond everything we've already seen, though, what may be the most intriguing things about Metroid Dread are the mysteries it's still keeping under wraps as we approach release day. Yoshio Sakamoto, while reaffirming that Dread's story is intended to provide closure on the 35-year story arc of Samus' relationship with the Metroids, has also said that Dread will set up future stories within this universe. We'll have more clues about where Samus will go next by the end.

Perhaps instead of the Metroids being her recurring target for extermination, the X Parasites will step into that role? They seemed like a one-and-done antagonistic force in Fusion, but since Dread is supposedly bringing them back for a second time, maybe a third is in the cards already?

Or how about those living Chozo? We've never seen any actually alive members of that species in any past game, even though they're so important to the plot of each one. Surely now that we've got evidence that they're still active in the galaxy, Dread won't be their only appearance, right?

. . . That is, if those really are living Chozo. The X Parasites can perfectly clone other creatures, you know . . .

The possibilities are exciting me nearly as much as Dread's reveal did! But no matter where she goes next, we know Samus will fearlessly face the darkness alone. And win! **— LUCAS**



SUPER MONKEY BALL: BANANA MANIA

Wait a minute . . . those aren't monkeys in those balls!

TWO YEARS AGO, Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz HD was nothing if not a roll of the dice. If it was successful, then it could pave the way to more Monkey Ball madness in the future! However, that success hinged on one of the least popular titles of the entire franchise.

It must have been a-peeling to enough players, though, because Sega revealed earlier this year that RGG Studio was bringing Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania to the Switch! Whereas Banana Blitz simply remade the 100 levels of the Wii game (ditching the motion control requirement in the process), Banana Mania features more than *300* levels from Super Monkey Ball, Super Monkey Ball 2 and Super Monkey Ball Deluxe.

300 levels? That isn't madness, that is Banana Mania!

On top of that, there are 12 minigames carried over from the previous entries, and while they'll have local co-op for up to four players, there won't be any online component (leaderboards notwithstanding). A revised story mode has also been added, featuring new comic-style cutscenes and a variety of unlockable new modes, including Golden Banana Mode (wherein you must collect all bananas across 10 stages to unlock a Golden AiAi), Reverse Mode (10 stages you play from finish line to starting line), Dark Banana Mode (avoid the rotten bananas!), a mission mode, a photo mode and a time attack mode. (Is anyone else suddenly craving banana pie à la mode?)

Newcomers to the series will also find various accessibility options to help maximize their monkeying around. Slow motion? Check. Doubled time limit? Check. A map guide to the goal? Check. An unlockable option for the jump action introduced in Banana Blitz? That's a big banana-yellow check! (And without bringing along the annoying bosses that went with it!)

As great as all this is, perhaps the most hyped feature of all is the character roster. You've got your regular go-to guys in AiAi, MeeMee, GonGon, Baby, YanYan and Doctor, plus Jam and Jet, who appeared in later entries.

Then there are the guests! Available in the game at launch are Sonic the Hedgehog and Tails, Beat from Jet Set Radio and the Dragon of Dojima himself, Kazuma Kiryu from RGG's own smash hit Yakuza series (the latter two in chibi form)! Then there are the premium guests, who will appear at and after launch as paid downloadable content. These include Morgana from Persona 5 (November 2), Sanrio's Hello Kitty (October 5), Suezo from Monster Rancher (October 19) and even a trio of Sega consoles (the Game Gear, Saturn and Dreamcast, October 5). Each DLC character will run $4.99, or the equivalent abroad, though the three consoles come as a set, and they're also included in the Digital Deluxe Edition. And those are just the guest stars we know of at press time – there may be more to come!

With all these levels, features and characters, Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania looks like more fun than a barrel of . . . well, you know.
– DAVID

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: RGG STUDIO
RELEASE: OCTOBER 5, 2021 RATING: E10+

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

Following up on our last issue with fast fresh info!

IS IT APRIL FOOLS' DAY!? Nope, but apparently it is April's Day over at Tribute Games, as they've officially announced April O'Neil as a playable character in everybody's most anticipated upcoming nostalgia-driven brawler, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge.

She was seen giving a boot to some Foot baddies in the opening cinematic of the game's first trailer, and some fans correctly guessed that was a hint to her being fully playable. But others didn't see it happening, since the game uses the 1987 April O'Neil look – and back then April was more of a hapless damsel-in-distress archetype who couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag.

This April was basically Princess Peach in the previous Turtles games, too – appearing only as a victim to be rescued. But just as Peach turned a corner and became a Smash fighter, so too follows April! Perhaps she's been taking some night classes in self defense after her shifts at Channel 6?

I wonder who was teaching those classes as well, as it appears most of her moves pay tribute to prominent female fighters from other video games, like Chun Li, Karin and R. Mika. On top of that, all the other playable characters sport ninja weapons, so to fight with your bare hands and the occasional mic drop is beyond brave! Most of the opponents are metal robots or possess tough animal skin!

April's reveal feels like it was less about her specifically, and more about the surprise of adding a non-Turtle into the playable mix. Few TMNT titles have dared to do that before! What doors will this open for others, now that a seemingly impossible character is allowed to brawl?

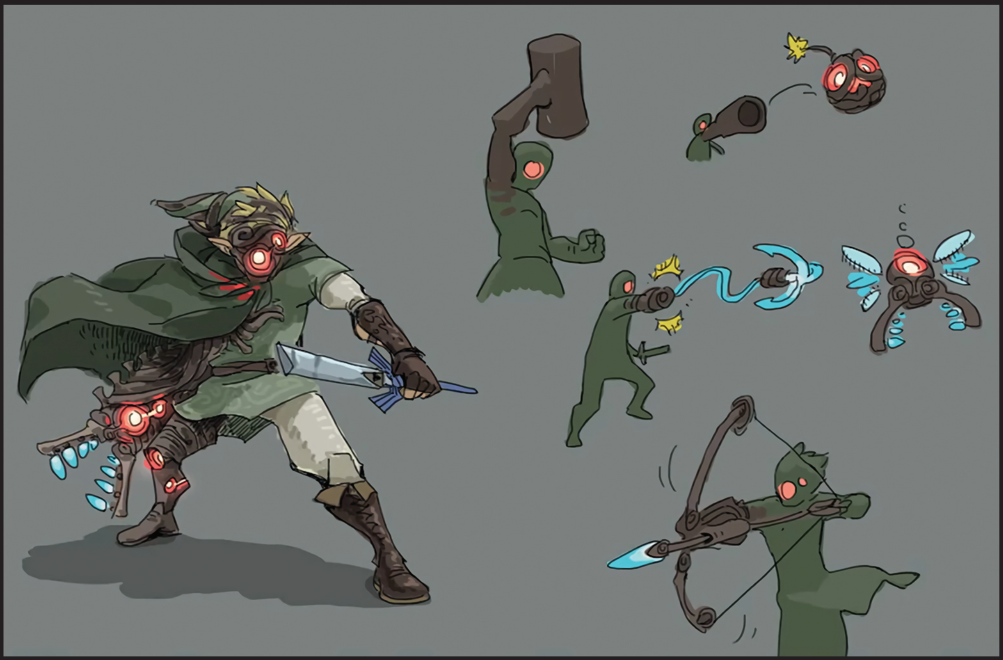
Casey Jones would be an obvious choice, as he often fights alongside the bros and has experienced a resurgence in popularity. Could Splinter join the fray? He was also shown fighting in the debut trailer, totally obliterating a Mouser. Could they dig a little deeper and introduce Mondo Gecko? The Punk Frogs? Mona Lisa? The Neutrinos? I would pay good money to see Vernon and Irma kick some shell, and if they include Miyamoto Usagi I might have to mail some fan letters!

We haven't seen anything suggesting villains might be playable, but the series' popularity rests in no small part on its rogues' gallery. Playing as Rocksteady, Bebop, Slash, Wingnut, Groundchuck or Dirtbag? That would be a real treat, even if it would just be total fanservice.

While it's nice to see that some non-reptilian playable characters will be available outside of potential DLC fighters, it doesn't rule DLC out, so who knows what news awaits us between now and release? April and a few others might be in the base game, while some are held back for DLC.

In other April news, Ms. O'Neil has also been revealed as playable in the upcoming party fighter Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl! She dons the same '87 look and still wields a microphone, but her moveset looks different. (For the record, it must sting Raph and Donnie a bit that April was announced before them, but who knows just how many TMNT characters will make it into that fray?) So much TMNT news and yet so many questions! **– BRETT**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES
RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP



SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

Looking back at old concept art can give us new clues!

WHEN NINTENDO FIRST showed footage of the follow-up to Breath of the Wild in June 2019, a few diehard fans were hit with a sense of déjà vu. This past June, when the sequel's second trailer debuted, it was déjà vu times two! And it's all because the key change in Link's character – his right arm getting transformed into something sinister – had first been seen before Breath of the Wild launched!

On March 1, 2017, two days before Breath of the Wild and the Switch were officially made available to the public, Nintendo's Hidemaro Fujibayashi, Satoru Takizawa and Takuhiro Dohta formed a Triforce of orators to address the audience at that year's Game Developers Conference. They offered deep insights into the development of the "convention-breaking" new Zelda – as well as some striking concept art.

The corrupted Link seen above was mixed in with several other "normal" Link sketches. It immediately stood out from the rest, and it must have stuck in the dev team's minds as well, because it's clear that it's a concept they've revisited for Breath of the Wild 2! Nothing like that transformation occurred in the original, but as we've seen, what is likely the opening scene of the sequel involves Link's arm being grabbed by gaseous, twisting tendrils of Ganon's magical malice. The newer trailer from this past summer confirms that moment permanently marks our hero, as he has to live – and still find a way to save Hyrule again – with one less healthy arm.

This concept art gives us some big clues for how that situation will develop further for our hero. His arm will likely gain new gameplay functionality over time, as the quest continues. The examples seen here are easy to trace back to earlier Zeldas, and it's easy to imagine how Breath of the Wild 2 could implement them, too.

First, and simplest, the bombs. Link already had access to an endless supply of explosives thanks to the Sheikah Slate in the first game, so giving players the same thing again with a different visual flair is easy.

Next, the bow. Bows were also in Breath of the Wild 1, but were breakable, and arrows were limited. With one instead built into Link himself, we could potentially be looking at a bow that will never break, and arrows that are fired not after having been found or bought, but perhaps after depleting some new kind of energy meter.

The Beetle is there, and anyone who's just recently replayed Skyward Sword should be able to envision the fun that bringing that item into a more open world would create. Scouting enemy encampments before charging in; dropping objects from above that wouldn't just shatter on impact any more, but would rather work with the physics engine to set off a domino effect of interactions. I can picture it!

The Zelda series staple Hookshot didn't make the cut for the first game, but with all the mountain climbing it involved, it would've been welcome!

Seeing it reappear in the sequel would still be welcome, and seems a bit more likely now that we know it involves a lot of navigating floating islands in the sky. Hookshotting from one to the next could provide quicker transitions than sailing on the Paraglider each time!

The big, beefy, built-in Megaton Hammer really ignites my imagination. Breath of the Wild had so many real-world reactions with fire, electricity, wind and the like — what if that list were expanded to include vibrations? Picture Link smashing the ground with his huge hammer hand, causing a localized earthquake as a result. Foes nearby could topple; the ground could crack and come apart. We've already seen earth crumble and fall away under Zelda's feet in the caves below the surface — maybe Link activating a hammer skill will help him pulverize a pathway for himself to search for her?

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the largest sketch on that concept art collage. The snapping jaw that has replaced our hero's hand is eye-catching, but more catching to my eye is Link's eye — or the lack thereof! Here, the corruption that began on Link's arm has spread, extending up to and enveloping his entire face. (And his right leg as well.) This could be a huge hint!

My prediction is this: Ganon's dark magic caught Link by the right arm, and it instantly started corrupting his body. Then the sacred, holy magic that had been keeping Ganondorf sealed in the cavern below the castle reached out to Link next, stablilizing him and stopping the spread of the poison . . . but not for good. Link begins the new quest with his arm corrupted, but the malice will grow to take over more of his body as the quest continues — so the secondary goal of the game, after finding and reuniting with Zelda, is seeking out a way to purify Link before the magical seal fails and Ganon's corruption takes over his body entirely.

And if that kind of a story gives you déjà vu, it's because we've seen a tale like that before — in the Metroid saga! Metroid Prime 3: Corruption similarly had Samus struggling against a poison that got worse over time, but also similarly gave her new abilities while it was coursing through her veins. Will Link be able to use the evil that's been inflicted upon him to defeat the true source of that evil, before it's too late?

Well, if Samus can do it, so can Link — and from this last piece of concept art on the right, I'd say the devs were thinking of that too! **— LUCAS**

NO JOKE, THIS IS AN ACTUAL PIECE OF CONCEPT ART FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF BREATH OF THE WILD. IT WAS MOST LIKELY JUST DRAWN FOR FUN, BUT THEN THE SKETCH OF LINK RIDING A MOTORCYCLE SEEMED LIKE A GAG TOO, SO WHO KNOWS?

AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES - NIRVANA INITIATIVE

The investigations continue . . . with Kaname kicked to the curb?

ANOTHER STRING OF peculiar murders is on the rise, and another special agent is on the case in Spike Chunsoft's upcoming detective adventure game AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative.

The game was announced in June, and it's a sequel to AI: The Somnium Files from 2019. That first game cast players as special agent Kaname Date, investigating murders with help from an artificial intelligence named Aiba and diving into a dream world called Somnium to extract information from people's memories. But this sequel sports a big difference from the first game right from the start: an all-new protagonist, Mizuki Okiura!

Mizuki played a part in the first game as a young student who became like a daughter to Kaname over time. It's clear some years have passed between the first game and its sequel, and now, Mizuki is taking center stage as a special agent in ABIS: the Advanced Brain Investigation Squad within the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

The change could be in response to criticism of Kaname's character, and Spike Chunsoft taking it into account. You don't have to look too hard to find people who weren't fond of Kaname and other male characters' perverted tendencies, and how they detracted from AI: The Somnium Files' narrative.

Some of the game's quick time events even focused on them! One of them involved Kaname shooting down a hanger with women's underwear to distract nearby guards, who gawked at it.

The announcement trailer for this sequel also mentions Kaname, with Aiba saying to Mizuki, "Take this mission more seriously. You're not like that perverted buffoon."

The game's website offers more information on the mysteries of nirvanA Initiative. Apparently, six years prior to the game, the right half of a corpse was found with no trace of the left. Now, in the present, the left half has appeared – with no signs of decay! That prompts an investigation by Mizuki and Aiba.

The first game focused on murders in which the victims' left eyes were removed, so the sequel seems like it will follow the same pattern with half-body serial killings. (Good, wholesome stuff in this series.)

Kotaro Uchikoshi, who wrote and directed the first game and worked on the Zero Escape series, is serving as scenario writer for the sequel and offered some insight via his English Twitter account. He mentioned that it isn't necessary to play the first game before the sequel, and players won't experience many spoilers if they start with the second. However, he said if you have played the first game, the second one may be more meaningful.

We'll have to see what it's like to dive into Somnium with Mizuki when the game arrives next year, but it sounds like nirvanA Initiative will provide more intriguing threads to unravel. While hopefully avoiding the perverted pitfalls of its predecessor!
– MAGGIE

SWITCH **PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER:** SPIKE CHUNSOFT **RELEASE:** SPRING 2022 **RATING:** M

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

Story details descend as the release date draws near.

EVERY TIME I see new information for Shin Megami Tensei V, I feel a greater sense of impending doom.

The upcoming post-apocalyptic JRPG from Atlus is set to release on November 12 exclusively on Nintendo Switch. Each new piece of marketing reveals more about the shady factions and forces at work in this story, which is bound to require players to make some tough choices along the way.

At the center of it all is the protagonist: a Tokyo high school student who finds himself transported to the desolate world of Da'at and then fuses with a mysterious figure called Aogami to become a Nahobino, a being with special powers that's neither a human nor a demon.

The world of Da'at features a wasteland that resembles Tokyo and that once hosted a battle between angels and demons 18 years before the game begins. Powerful deities, creatures and demons still remain there. You'll encounter more than 200 demons to fight, ally with and fuse together.

You can negotiate with demons to gain their favor, but their responses will be based on your own actions and dialogue choices. Fusing them results in more powerful demons and abilities, and you'll have options as far as how many you can fuse together and what you want to create.

Since SMT V's E3 deep dive, Atlus has been releasing daily videos of the demons you'll encounter in the game on its Japanese YouTube channel. So far, we've seen familiar faces like Jack Frost and Mothman, and a new one: Amanozako, a cute, petite demon with a pesky personality. These regular reveals are set to continue until the game's release.

The Press Turn Battle System first introduced in SMT III: Nocturne will return in SMT V, allowing players to execute several actions in a row with the protagonist and his allies. You can gain more turns by exploiting an enemy's weakness, so your main goal will be figuring those out and minimizing the amount of turns your foes receive.

Beyond fighting and allying with the beings of Da'at, the protagonist will get involved with Bethel, an organization tasked with fighting demons appearing in Tokyo. Bethel has several branches, and the one in Japan is led by the country's prime minister, Hayao Koshimizu – who looks *a lot* like Aogami. I don't think that's a coincidence!

Bethel's main leader, Archangel Abdiel, also seems like a force to be reckoned with, judging by the game's trailers – she won't allow anyone to hinder Bethel's plans.

Other characters from the protagonist's life in Tokyo are connected to Bethel, including his classmates Tao Isonokami, who has some sort of spiritual power, and Yuzuru Atsuta and Ichiro Dazai, who join to help combat the demons.

Shin Megami Tensei V seems poised to be a standout entry in the series, bringing in longtime fans and capturing the attention of newcomers. Either way, get ready for a dark journey from start to finish and several endings to discover! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: ATLUS RELEASE: NOVEMBER 12, 2021 RATING: M

MARIO PARTY SUPERSTARS

Revisiting the parties of the past! (Again.)

NOT EVERY PARTY is a winner.

You know that already – no matter who you are, you're surely able to call upon memories of parties you've attended in the past that just weren't up to snuff. Bland birthdays. Groaner graduations. Wedding receptions that just weren't well received.

The Mario Party video game series is not immune to this reality. In fact, since so many millions of players have taken part in each of the past Mario Party experiences, and since each of those partygoers has then formed their own personal opinion about whether or not what they just played was actually any good, Mario Party as a whole has been criticized by more people than any other festivities ever!

Mario Party Superstars aims to avoid annoying anyone. Because that same long history of the series – while giving rise to over two decades' worth of complaints – has also produced a great deal of Mario Party content that has been collectively agreed upon as being great.

Imagine being able to assemble your own ultimate party, pulling from pieces of your own past. The great Mario-shaped birthday cake from when you turned 8; the beautiful weather from your favorite summertime family cookout; the guest list you had for your last high school hangout before all your friends went their separate ways. It'd be hard to make happen – but it would be wonderful!

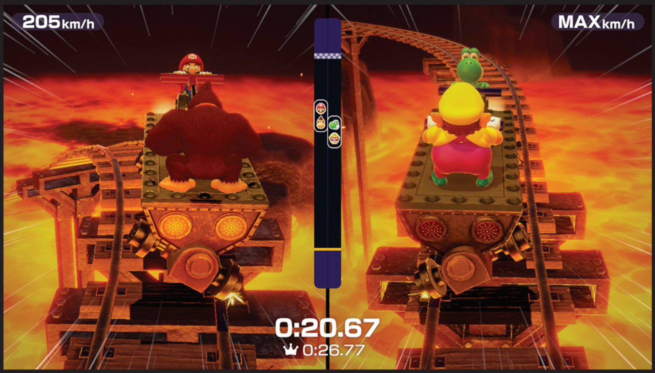
Such a greatest hits list is easier for Nintendo to pull together – and that's exactly the approach here. Superstars is a "best of" Mario Party game that plans to do very little that is entirely new. Rather, it's looking back to the best bits of 20+ years of previous series sequels, pulling them out of the past, polishing them up and presenting them to an all-new generation of eager party attendees on the Switch.

We've seen this approach applied in the past, as a few years ago the 3DS game Mario Party: The Top 100 made its core mission the revival of the 100 best minigames previously seen in the series. It stumbled in other areas, though – first because of its format (being on 3DS), and second since it put *too much* emphasis on the minigames.

Mario Party's minigames are great, but not in a vacuum. Their greatness is only really unlocked in their original, intended context, which is them being played by four friends and/or family members all crowded together on the same couch, laughing and crying and getting outraged at one another as they're being played. That's critical.

As are the game boards that serve as the connective tissue between minigame matches. You can't just play the minis without any stakes attached – you need to know that "If Luigi wins this game, he'll have enough Coins to buy a Star! We can't let that happen!" or "Everybody team up against Daddy, because he's already won the last four games in a row!"

Thankfully, again, Superstars is eliminating any cause for concern there. Like The Top 100, a set of 100 great minigames from past Parties is featured here. But unlike The Top 100, we're also getting the full console multiplayer experience across a set of five different game boards pulled out of the past as well! Each one is a proven winner hailing originally from one of the three N64 installments of the series, including Peach's Birthday Cake (MP1) and Woody Woods (MP3).



The only potential pitfall here? The same complaint so many had against Super Mario Party getting echoed again: not enough boards. The count for Superstars is slightly better for starters, as the base number of five different game boards is an increase over Super Mario Party's paltry four. But five total is still thin, and I'm sure that will end up being the fandom's lightning rod of complaint again this time.

But . . . there may be some hope for that total of five to get bumped up a bit. Recently Nintendo's been dropping surprise free DLC additions for a few of their new releases. New Pokémon Snap got a free content update on August 3, just over three months after its April 30 launch, that added three new courses to play and 20 new species of Pokémon to find and photograph. Mario Golf: Super Rush got an expansion even faster, as Toadette was made playable, a new mode was added and a New Donk City course opened up all on August 6, just a little over one month after its June 25 launch date.

I can't promise the same thing will happen with Mario Party Superstars, but Nintendo has set the precedent, and a free update that added a sixth nostalgic board to the mix after the initial rush of sales dies down seems like it would be so great for reigniting interest. So let's all cross our fingers and hope!

Even if Superstars stays locked down to the content it will present on Day 1 forever, though, it will still be more than worth a purchase for any gamer out there who can safely pull together a full set of four players to share the same couch together and make an all-new set of Mario Party memories.

. . . But wait! Superstars will have online support from Day 1 too! So getting together a group of four will be easier than ever. Maybe I can get in touch with my high school friends and make sure they all have Switch units and a free Saturday night sometime soon! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NDCUBE
RELEASE: OCTOBER 29, 2021 RATING: E

POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

Extra layers of polish applied!

WHEN THEY WERE first revealed earlier this year, the new Switch remakes of Pokémon Diamond & Pearl weren't exactly widely embraced by the greater Pokémon fandom. No new Pokémon product is ever universally accepted, of course, since a group with a membership numbering in the tens of millions will never reasonably achieve consensus on anything – but the detractors this time around had some legitimate complaints, you have to agree.

Firstly, the decision to chibi-fy any video game series unexpectedly has never been met with anything but scorn, so seeing the Sinnoh region shrunk down to look like it's made of plastic and populated by toys was unsurprisingly unpopular. Thankfully, with several more months' worth of polish now applied, this Diamond is looking a bit more Brilliant, and this Pearl is showing more Shine.

The graphics have been improved both for overworld exploration and in battle, as extra detail is now in place and the whole presentation looks more cohesive. It's no total overhaul – we're still getting shrimpy character models for the humans outside of fight scenes – but it's made great strides.

For me personally, I was never too worried about the look of these games – it's the gameplay that had me concerned. I'll make some diehard Gen IV fans angry by saying this, but Diamond & Pearl, to me, were the series' worst.

I chose Turtwig. In hindsight, that was a clear mistake – Chimchar was sitting right there – but I figured I'd be able to encounter some other new Fire-type 'mon to cover that base on my team as I explored Sinnoh. Nope! The Sinnoh region introduced literally no other Fire-types in the wild through its main campaign, presenting only a few patches of grass where you could encounter Gen I's old standby Ponyta instead, then calling it a day.

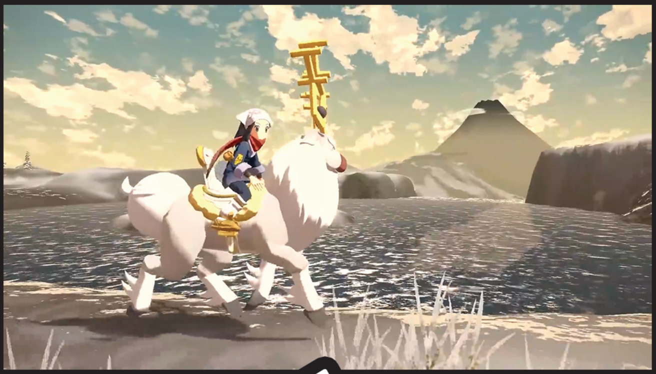
That leads into my second problem, which was Sinnoh's overall lack of new monsters. Only 107 new creatures made the cut, but 29 of those were new evolutions or pre-evolutions of prior Gens' 'mons, so even the new felt old part of the time.

OK, I'll cut my complaining short there, as I've actually already ranted about Gen IV back in NF #43! At that time, I said that any potential Gen IV remakes were going to have an uphill battle to convince me to get on board.

Luckily, signs are pointing toward progress on that front as well! Just as the graphics have been improved since these remakes' first reveal, so too have the gameplay shortcomings of the source material been shored up. There won't be any all-new Pokémon to catch in Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl, but an expansion of the Sinnoh Underground is at least going to bring more Fire-types into the mix during the main campaign. See above a lava-filled cavern you can find, with the likes of Numel and Magby walking around. The newest trailer even spent a few moments specifically showing a player catching a Houndoom. (They know!)

So if you, like me, are one of the longtime Pokémon players who never thought too highly of the Sinnoh titles, or if you reacted negatively to the chibi look selected for these remakes when they were first revealed, give them a second chance. They might just end up surprising you! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ILCA RELEASE: NOVEMBER 19, 2021 RATING: E



POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

New Pokémon discovered in the Old Sinnoh region!

GIVEN MY RESERVATIONS about revisiting Pokémon's fourth generation, I wasn't too thrilled when I first saw that the ambitious new Pokémon Legends: Arceus would also be using the old Sinnoh region as its setting. Thankfully, it's not the same old Sinnoh, but rather *Old* Sinnoh, as in the Sinnoh of yesteryear! And the Pokémon population of the past seems to be entirely different.

For starters, Game Freak and The Pokémon Company have decided to give this region a unique name. While it will come to be known as Sinnoh in the future, in the past this same land mass went by the name "Hisui." And since it's being treated as a unique region now, it logically follows that it would have some unique regional variants!

First up, Hisuian Braviary. We first met the bald eagle-inspired Braviary in Pokémon Black & White, where it was a Normal/Flying-type with a crest of feathers framing its face that looked like a Native American headdress. Its new Hisuian form is Psychic/Flying instead, and it's got a glowing new head adornment that surely helps it channel its new psychic powers! Will we get to meet a new Hisuian Rufflet as well, or will this new Braviary simply evolve from the old Rufflet?

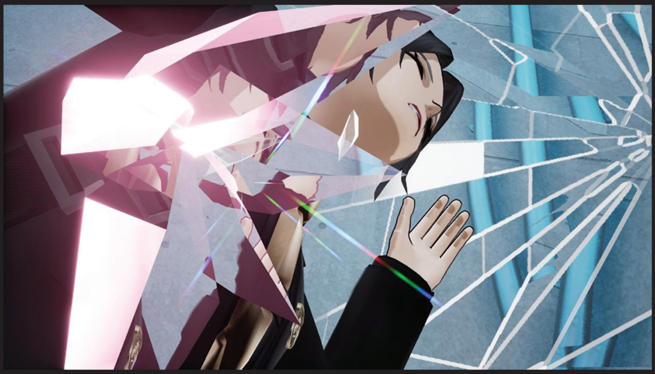
The evolution questions are more intense with Hisuian Growlithe. The Fire-type pup we've known since the very first Pokémon games has finally received a new form, and it's Fire/Rock now. (With an adorable overabundance of fluffy fur hanging over its eyes!) Naturally we'd expect a new Hisuian Arcanine to be introduced as well . . . but Pokémon Sword & Shield debuted the idea that regional variant Pokémon can sometimes evolve into totally different forms with new names instead. Galarian Meowth didn't turn into Galarian Persian, for example – it became the new Perrserker. So maybe Growlithe will grow in a different, more unexpected direction? Given that Growlithe and Arcanine have always been partly inspired by lion guardian statues and the new Hisuian pup's Rock type and fur style make that connection stronger than ever, I'd guess a stone-built beast of some variety lies in our future. (Too bad Fire/Rock isn't the best type combo, competitively!)

Two all-new evolutions of older Pokémon have also been revealed to live in Hisui: Wyrdeer, an evolution of Gen II's Stantler, and Basculegion, an evolution of Gen V's Basculin. Wyrdeer is a weird one to me, as it looks like it would be a Stantler regional variant and not an evolution – its body shape is almost entirely unchanged except for its antlers. It's just white with a beard and a floofier tail. I imagine this design was going to be Hisuian Stantler before it was decided that making it an evolution would be better for game balance in battle. It's a Normal/Psychic-type.

Basculegion, meanwhile, is the true standout of this set of four, as it's a menacing new fish beast that absolutely elevates the low profile of the old, forgettable Basculin. It's a Water/Ghost that is possessed by the spirits of hundreds of deceased Basculin!

These four are just the beginning, so let's look forward to meeting more new 'mons in Old Sinnoh! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK RELEASE: JANUARY 28, 2022 RATING: RP



THE CALIGULA EFFECT 2

Can you overcome your past regrets and return to the real world?

IF YOU COULD live in a world without pain and regret, would you? Even if it meant forgetting who you were in the past? It's a tempting proposition, and it's one the cast of The Caligula Effect 2 finds themselves struggling with in this upcoming JRPG from FuRyu and former Persona series writer Tadashi Satomi.

The Caligula Effect 2 takes place in a virtual world called Redo, where its inhabitants' past mistakes are all declared null and void, and they get a second chance to live out their ideal lives. You, as the male or female protagonist, realize this world is fake thanks to a being called X, then you form the Go Home Club to escape. To do so, you must fight against Regret, the creator of this world who entices people with her voice, and her allies, the Obbligato Musicians.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: FURYU
RELEASE: OCTOBER 19, 2021 RATING: T

It's unclear from the marketing if this is a direct sequel to the first Caligula Effect from 2017, but the two games have nearly identical premises. The first game – and its 2019 remake The Caligula Effect: Overdose – also feature a virtual world where people can live out their desired life, as well as a villain who seeks to keep them trapped and unaware.

If you want to see what this series has to offer before the sequel arrives, you can play Overdose on Switch. It's better than the 2017 original due to the performance and graphical fixes it received, along with the addition of a new storyline.

Both the original game and its remake received their fair share of criticism, though, with complaints of poor writing, overly long battles and a shallow bonding system with more than 500 characters. Despite this, I'm really hoping FuRyu has learned from these critiques – because what I've seen from Caligula 2 has me intrigued, and it has the possibility of taking the first game's premise and systems and making them better.

I think the secrets of the Go Home Club members could go to interesting places. On the surface, these characters all appear to be high school students – but their looks are a facade. NIS America's website hints that the realities of these characters may stray far from the lives and ages of regular high school students, which may lead to some intriguing reveals.

The developers have tied specific songs to characters in Caligula 2 – both the Go Home Club protagonists and the Obbligato Musician opposition – and it makes sense, due to the game's connections with music. Early samples of these songs all feature a catchy electropop sound that bodes well for the soundtrack as a whole.

The combat sequences also look like they could offer something fresh. The turn-based battle system requires players to use its Imaginary Chain to observe their future actions and determine which abilities and combos will work best in each situation.

Other gameplay offerings include the Causality Link, where you help citizens of Redo, and the Wire, where you can communicate with your allies and learn about them.

If you're interested, consider NIS America's Limited Edition, which has a hardcover art book, the soundtrack on two CDs, a school bag, luggage tag, school ID and a collector's box!

I think The Caligula Effect 2 has the makings of a solid niche JRPG with its premise and gameplay. Here's hoping the developers at FuRyu have learned from the first game's shortcomings and they make this sequel something special!

And if they haven't, and if they don't? They'll surely regret it!
– MAGGIE

FATAL FRAME: MAIDEN OF BLACK WATER

Swapping in a new set of costumes just before Halloween.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: KOEI TECMO RELEASE: OCTOBER 28, 2021 RATING: M

SAMUS IS FINALLY headed to the Nintendo Switch, but a little part of her was just pulled from another game on the system. Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water on the Wii U included bonus costumes that let you dress up as Princess Zelda and Zero Suit Samus. Both extras were cut for the upcoming re-release on Switch! That's probably because Nintendo isn't publishing this port. I guess we can kiss all hopes of seeing more Fatal Frame representation in Smash goodbye as well!

In place of the excised Zelda and Samus skins, we're getting a lot more exposed skin from the game's leading ladies, including multiple wet swimsuits, some gothic lolita outfits, a tight-fitting triathlon onesie for cover girl Yuri and a callback to Miku's Fatal Frame III style for her daughter Miu. Poor Ren, the game's lone playable boy (a.k.a. playboy?) only gets one new suit: a bridegroom's tuxedo. But who is he going to marry? Surely it won't be a *g-g-g-ghost!*

(You'll have to see each of the game's multiple endings for yourself to find out.)

One last overview before release: This spooky adventure is actually the fifth in the Fatal Frame series, and it does a pretty good job of relating to the titles that came before it. Using the Camera Obscura, you take on ghost after hostile ghost in and around Mount Hikami, a fictional countryside based on real locales in Japan.

One thing that struck me about these apparitions is the air of tragedy that they float through. Feeling bad for them and fearing them at the same time happens a lot.

It's easy to have similarly mixed feelings about this re-release. On one hand, it's almost no one's favorite title in the series. On the other hand, if it fails, that may be the last nail in Fatal Frame's coffin. So what is the team at Koei Tecmo doing to help it survive?

Well, for one, they added a new Photo Mode, allowing you to set up characters in various positions to create the perfect terrifying picture. You can also select various camera lenses and other effects to really get creative. Chances are slim that this new mode will make or break the game either way, but it's nice to see them try.

Or are they trying? It's hard to be sure. The original release of Maiden of Black Water never saw a physical release in the United States. That was Nintendo's call, and many blame the game's soggy sales on that decision. But now Koei Tecmo is making the same move! The game isn't getting a physical release in the States again! Will it be doomed to jump right back into the watery grave Nintendo dug for it on the Wii U? Or was the game cursed from the start?

(A physical release on Switch will be on sale in other regions, thankfully, and it will include the game's English version. Check import shops like Play-Asia if you're interested.)

We'll find out for ourselves just how well this game's second chance will go when it jumps out of our TVs and into our homes on October 28, mere days before Halloween! **— JONATHAN**

baby SAMUS in... METROID TREAD

BY MATTHEW TARANTO

SAMUS ARAN'S TRUE IDENTITY REVEALED

METROID
NES, 1987

It's been said before, but merits mentions again: The ending sequence of the original Metroid contained one of the greatest shocks in gaming industry history! (Circa 1987, that is.) Even the instruction manual for the game had used male pronouns for Samus to deliberately obscure the secret awaiting the speediest players at the end of the game: the revelation that Samus Aran was a woman all along! Five different endings were possible, each one presenting its own unique depiction of our hero – I've lined all five of her looks up for a combined collage above. If beating Mother Brain and escaping Planet Zebes took you longer than 10 hours, Samus would simply turn away from the camera to cry in shame. A time under the 10-hour mark earned you a fully armored wave. Less than five hours? Her helmet came off, revealing her real face! (In a handful of pixels.) Dashing through in under three hours had her step out of her Power Suit entirely, and lightning-fast finishers with a time under 60 minutes saw a cringeworthy swimsuit. **— LUCAS**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, there's fire, and there were few things more fire in the mid-'90s than Mortal Kombat – so it only made sense to make Smoke the cover star when heralding the arrival of Mortal Kombat Trilogy on the Nintendo 64!

Within the magazine, eight pages of this Kombat Kompilation kicked off a kavalcade of klassic N64 koverage. Wave Race 64 and Pilotwings 64 each got their own features, with the latter sharing poster space with Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble!. Rounding things out for the Fun Machine were an eight-page preview of Dark Horse's Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire comic book, which gave a different perspective of the events portrayed in the upcoming LucasArts game of the same name, and an interview with Shigeru Miyamoto from Famimaga 64 was also presented, mostly talking about Super Mario 64, with a little bit of Zelda, 64DD and networking included as well.

There was also a Nickelodeon "Spot the Dot" instant win game, wherein Power Players (while taking a break from playing games or reading Nintendo Power, presumably) could watch select Nickelodeon shows to see if they could spot the eponymous dot. If they used the game piece included with this issue to decode the message, they could win a trip to Los Angeles for a walk-on role on The Secret World of Alex Mack, as well as a Nintendo 64 console with a copy of Super Mario 64. Runners-up would receive a Blockbuster Nintendo 64 rental package or one free issue of NP.

While Nintendo 64 was undisputedly the new hotness in town, the Super NES wasn't due to be put out to pasture just yet. Joining its poster presence was a six-page preview of DKC3, and if that wasn't enough, another preview revealed that Capcom was aiming to do the impossible and bring their arcade hit, Street Fighter Alpha 2, to the sunsetting 16-bit hardware as well. It was enough to make the following four pages of Ms. Pac-Man look downright quaint in comparison!

More Super sizzle came in the form of shorter previews for Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3, Disney's Pinocchio, NBA Hangtime and Prince of Persia 2: The Shadow and the Flame – eight years before the Prince would unleash his angst by awakening the Warrior Within. Epic Center would look at SimCity 2000 and Super Mario RPG strategies, but the main feature was a look at Nintendo Power Source's Hyrulean Adventure (see sidebar). Elsewhere, the Game Boy maintained its presence until Pokémon revitalized the platform with Tetris Attack (a.k.a. Panel de Pon) and a 2-in-1 Game Pak featuring Battlezone and Super Breakout.

Now Playing revealed the re-releases of a few classic titles at lower prices, including Donkey Kong '94, Mario Paint, Toy Story and Super Mario Land. Meanwhile, Pak Watch looked to the future with glimpses of Blast Corps, Killer Instinct Gold, Lode Runner and more Turok: Dinosaur Hunter for the N64. There was also news on Incantation for the SNES, a Game Boy version of PlayStation heavy hitter Battle Arena Toshinden and a variety of EA Sports games for the Game Boy, courtesy of Black Pearl. Other updates assured us that "Super Mario Kart R" (Mario Kart 64) and Star Fox (64) from Nintendo, as well as Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey, NBA Hangtime, DOOM 64 and War Gods, all from Williams, were all well on their way.

In an amusing twist, the previous issue erroneously stated that the Nintendo 64 package would *not* include an A/V cable. NP not only corrected the mistake in this issue, but also showed how to hook up your new console with that device. The N64 could use the RF input if players so desired, but it would require an additional adapter – quite a surprise for some of us who picked up our consoles at launch, as many a Super NES owner no doubt used an RF switch to play with Super Power, just as we did with our NES consoles!

Closing things out, the Player's Poll contest promised Power Players the moon – or rather, a star, as winners would not only get to name their own, but also bring home 100 real gold coins in this Super Mario 64-themed sweepstakes (and they'd get an N64 with Super Mario 64, too). Runners-up would get a Mario or Bowser sweatshirt, a copy of the game and the soundtrack on either CD or cassette (remember those?)! **– DAVID**

ISSUE #89: **OCTOBER 1996**

A HYRULEAN ADVENTURE

The world was a very different place in 1996. For one thing, there were only three Zelda games! Not three on the current platform – three, period. With a lack of localized manga and Hyrule Historias, fans would have to turn elsewhere to sate their Hyrulean hunger. They would have to turn to . . . the internet. **cue thunder and lightning** Things generally weren't quite so bad back then, though. Especially if you were to partake in gated virtual communities such as those found on America Online, like Nintendo Power Source. In this sanctuary from other worlds both real and virtual, like-minded fans could gather together to participate in a Zelda-themed interactive adventure. Here, a far-off, unexplored island of Hyrule named Shigramar played home to a shipwrecked group of humans, monkeys and other more fantastic creatures. Three scribes officially documented the goings-on in this virtual community (with DarkPanda's used in this feature), as the group did everything from building a city to electing a governor to holding live trials and rock concerts. By the time this feature ran in Nintendo Power, 6,000 posts had been made, and those were likely followed by many more. However, it would seem that all records of Shigramar, its citizens and its history have been lost to time. That is, unless you know something we don't? If an archive of this exists out there somewhere, let us know!

CARTRIDGE CARTOGRAPHY

Remembering how gaming in the '80s inspired a generation of amateur mapmakers.

YOU KIDS THESE days . . . you don't know how easy you've got it! With your autosaves, checkpoints and minimaps. Back in my day, we had one button, a joystick, and the inability to pause. And we liked it!

Games have definitely become more convenient, which is probably for the best. If you've ever touched an '80s CRPG, you know how bad a user interface can get. It's not very entertaining when you need a manual to understand what the buttons do on the inventory screen. Information had to be conveyed as best as possible using rudimentary graphics, or sometimes nothing but text.

One such feature that is ubiquitous now but was often excluded from early games is a map of any sort. Many early games included large worlds, intricate dungeons and complicated warps, and keeping track of them was left up to the player. You could rely on repetition and memory if you were determined or patient enough. There were player guides and magazines that you could purchase that mapped games out. Otherwise, like many of us, you made your own map.

Text adventures are perhaps the genre that most required the skill of cartography. Many would just say something along the lines of "You're in a room. There are exits to the North and West." It can quickly become difficult to remember how many Wests you took and where that locked door was.

The solution was a sheet of graph paper. Most game worlds utilized some manner of grid, so having the guidelines allowed you to easily keep track of how many screens you traversed. It was a little more reliable than memory and imagination.

Even as adventures became more graphical, there was a dearth of maps to be found. The Legend of Zelda notably had a grid in the top left of the screen that represented your position in the overworld, but gave no other information. There were no maps to find outside, as there were in the dungeons. Instead, it came packed with a physical map to reference.

Metroid, released shortly after that, may be one of the more notorious examples of a mapless game. Featuring a sprawling sidescrolling world, it was easy to get lost inside Planet Zebes. Much of the world looked the same, making it difficult to make distinctions between corridors and shafts. Furthermore, remembering where you saw that out-of-reach power-up could be extremely difficult without taking good notes.

An explosion of exploration-based games followed in the wake of Metroid, and few of them had useful maps. 1987's Goonies II had a complex system of warps that necessitated good note-taking. 1988's Golgo 13 featured first-person mazes that were difficult to navigate without a little cartography. 1989's Legacy of the Wizard, for another example, would show your position on the game world, but did little to explain how its many screens connected.

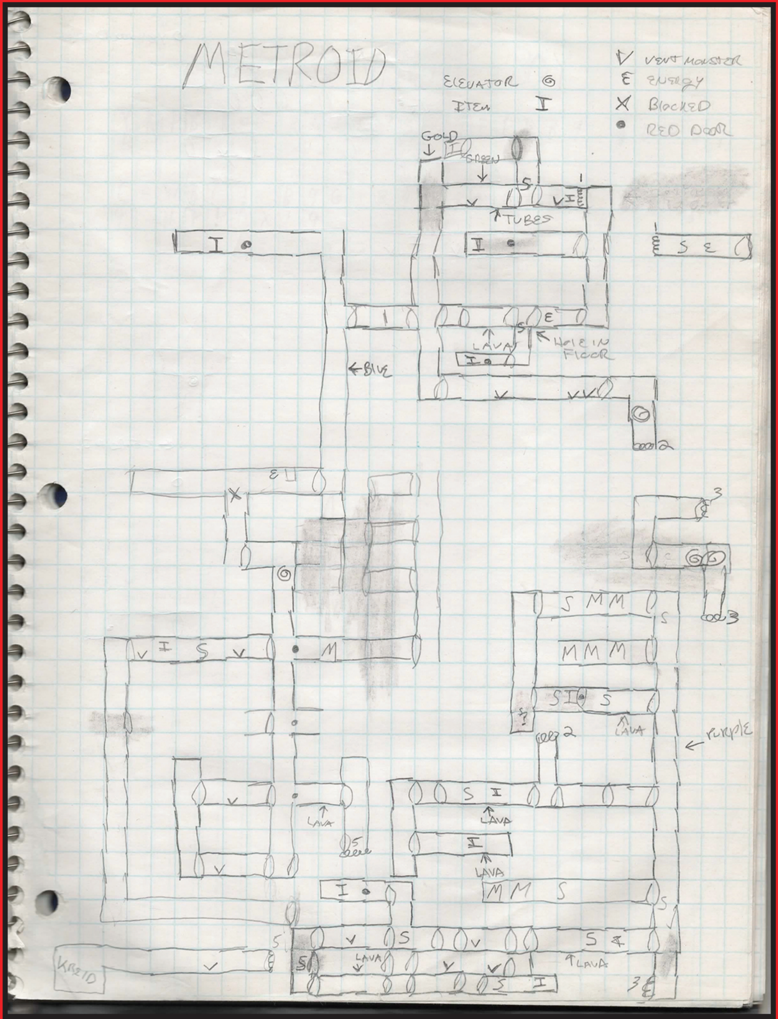
Even games that originally came packed with a physical map provide opportunity for mapmaking. Many of those old games, when sold used or digitally, no longer have those maps. I dare you to try navigating the depiction of the Caribbean in Sid Meier's Pirates! without some sort of topography at your side.

The lack of a map was later addressed in the Metroid series starting with Super Metroid. By that time, in-game maps were rather commonplace and just becoming more and more helpful. Now, they often contain additional information, such as what rooms still contain power-ups and what percentage of the map has been completed.

Even if that fails, finding a graphical depiction of a game world is as easy as looking it up online. There are websites dedicated to providing maps to the mapless, deobfuscating previously confusing worlds like the one in Metroid. It can be looked at as either cheating – as many secrets are shown nakedly on modern maps – or you can view it as a way of making up for the limited technology of the past or developer oversights. Always play games in the way that makes sense to you.

A lot can be said about making your own maps, however. It's a way of reconnecting with the past. It's a more intimate way of studying and absorbing yourself in the game world. You can also view it as a method of testing your ability to draw straight lines! But moreso, it preserves the world's secrets and ensures that all the discovery is left in your hands, taking place at your own pace.

So maybe the next time you pull Metroid off the shelf, also grab a sheet of graph paper. It may be a new way to experience Zebes! **– ZOEY**

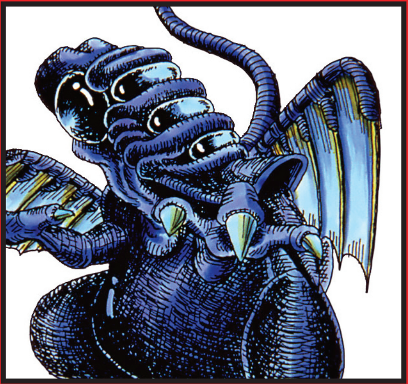


RECAPTURING AN EARLIER ERA

When I started playing retro games in earnest, I knew I wanted the authentic experience – so I invested in a spiral-bound notebook of graph paper. This helped me keep track of my passwords, my high scores and, of course, my maps. It's been my helper for over a decade now and still sees frequent use. The map pictured here was actually drawn by my husband as I played Metroid on the Famicom Disk System. It was while we were still dating, both of us cuddled up in a big armchair, hunched over my CRT television. That's what I call romance! I told him his mapmaking skills were terrible, and I stand by that. Look at this mess! In comparison, mine are works of art.

CHARACTER PROFILE
RIDLEY

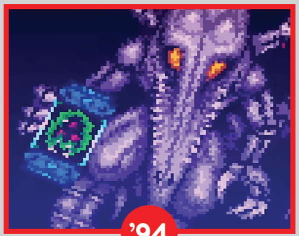
Samus Aran's endlessly resurrected arch-enemy!



FIRST APPEARANCE
METROID (NES, 1987)

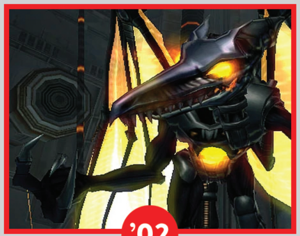
CAREER HIGHS

Seven years later, though, Ridley was overhauled into a truly intimidating menace who also got to kick the story into gear in Super Metroid's intro!



'94

In both Metroid Fusion and Metroid Prime (seen here), Ridley was reborn in new forms and faced off against Samus once again.

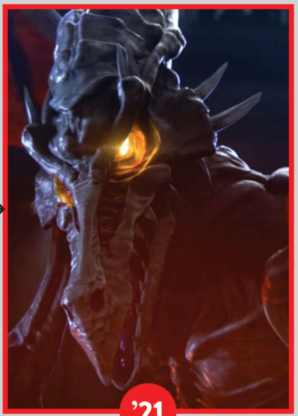


'02

Ridley getting shoehorned into every bit of Metroid media often seems forced, but there's no denying he makes a big impact each time!

'17

And so we arrive at the launch of Metroid Dread with that question yet again lingering in the air: Will Ridley appear to oppose Samus once more? Realistically he shouldn't, as he's fully dead at the point in the timeline when Dread takes place.

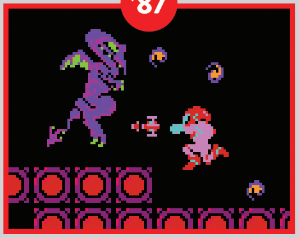


'21

But that's never stopped him before! If the developers want it to happen, they'll cook up some fresh way to explain why he's been brought back to life for the dozenth time. And most fans won't mind a bit! (Including me!)

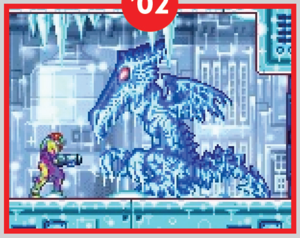
CAREER LOWS

'87



An unimpressive first appearance in the original Metroid caused little fear in NES players; spamming Missiles at close range took him out quickly.

'02

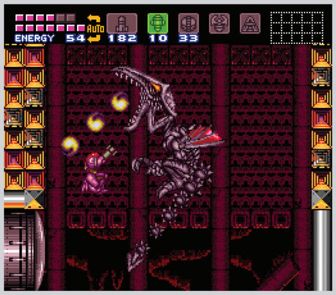


Following his defeat in the fiery depths of Norfair, Ridley's remains were put on ice. He didn't stay lifeless for long, though!

'10

A seemingly never-ending parade of clones, cyborg forms and full robot doppelgängers kept justifying his encore appearances thereafter.

HIGHLIGHTS



SUPER METROID
SNES, 1994

Jumping from 8-bit to 16-bit hardware really helped Ridley get an incredible glow-up for just his second appearance ever. It felt amazing to hunt him down in the bowels of Planet Zebes and take revenge for his kidnapping of the Baby!

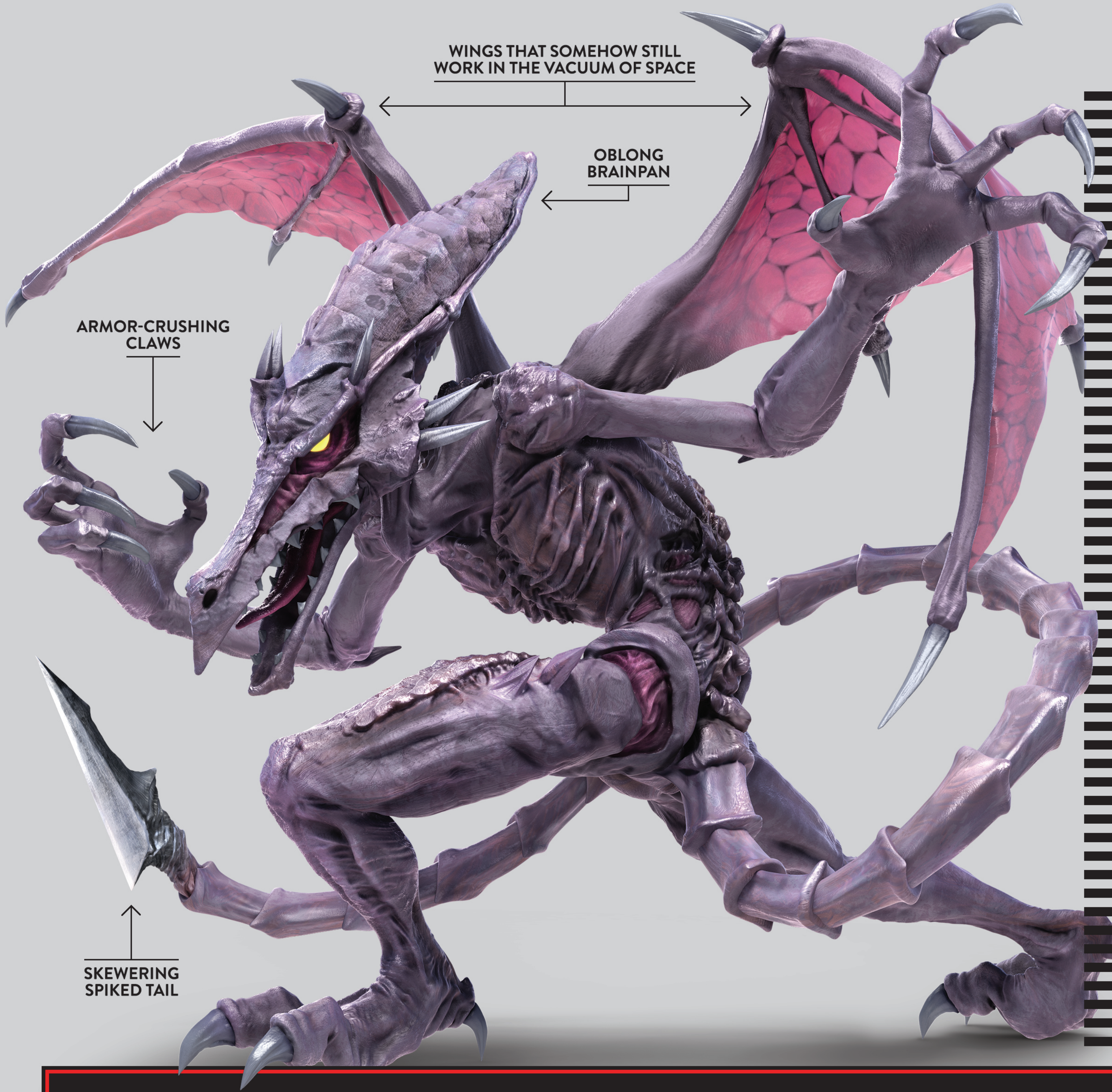
METROID PRIME
GAMECUBE, 2002

If you want a truly intense and visually striking spectacle of a Ridley battle, look no further than the clash against Meta Ridley in the midst of a downpour in Metroid Prime. His power of flight is on full display as, freed from a cramped underground chamber, he soars through the sky and swoops down on Samus with wretched malice. A top-tier Metroid boss battle.

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE
SWITCH, 2018

And if you want the exact opposite of the seriousness of that Metroid Prime moment, simply fire up the latest installment of Super Smash Bros. and command the sinister space dragon to do battle with cartoon dogs, two-dimensional monochrome men and literal children. Smash is a wild mix, but Ridley somehow still feels like he's totally out of place being there.

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

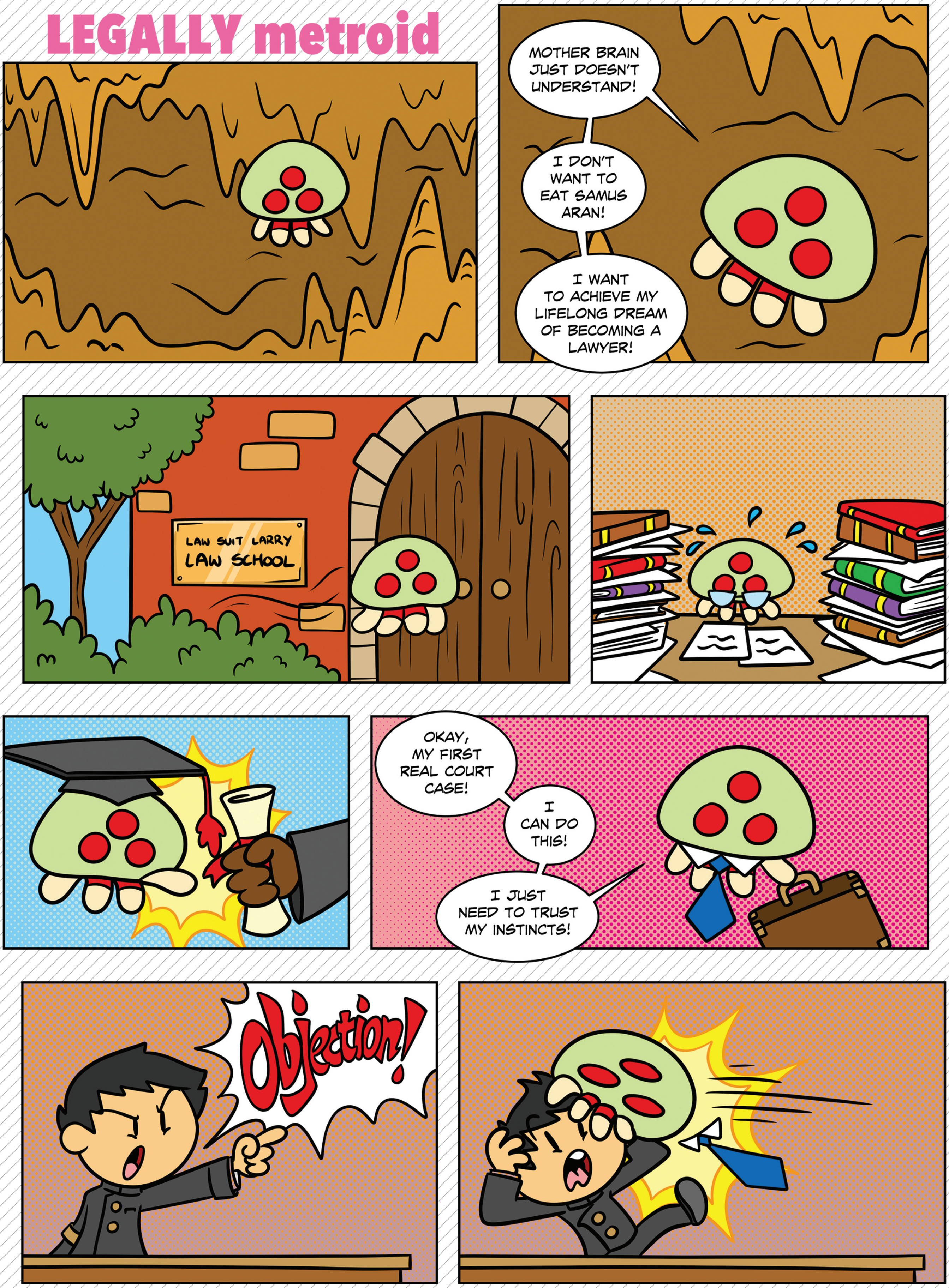


PROVING THAT SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

THE "HE'S TOO BIG!" DEBATE

The artwork above comes to us courtesy of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, the game that finally laid to rest a debate that had been raging in the speculative Smash fandom for the better part of two decades. Almost since the inception of the Smash series, hopeful fans had crossed their fingers and wished for Ridley to be added as a playable fighter, in order to be able to control him in face-offs against Samus, who'd been a member of the Smash cast since the base roster of its original installment was revealed. Arguing against this wish were a vocal few who rallied around a single seemingly disqualifying factor: Ridley was too big! He was simply physically too large a character to be made convincingly into a fighter on the same scale as the rest of the roster. And, granted, that argument had merit, as most of Ridley's appearances in the Metroid games render him as a towering dragon beast, massively larger than Samus herself! Still, such a matter of mismatched size was only a small problem for Masahiro Sakurai. He and his team found a happy medium, bringing us a playable Ridley who's still big, but not "too big!"

LEGALLY metroid



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

NICKNAME
Konjak

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
1986, in Sweden

FAVORITE FOOD
Smoked roe

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
I'm not an angry person.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Independent Game Developer

BEST KNOWN FOR
Iconoclasts, Noitu Love 2: Devolution & The Legend of Princess

JOAKIM SANDBERG

Talking Metroidvanias, Dwayne Johnson and solo game development with the independent iconoclast himself!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: What are some of the games that made you want to be a developer?
JOAKIM: I'm not certain it's specific games anymore – it was just me wanting to make them, and imagining making them long before I knew I could do that as a hobby. I just always loved and played games as a kid, starting with mostly Master System then NES then just on from there with a Nintendo focus. Games that still inspire how I design these days, however, are Metroid, Mario and honestly the feel of fighting games, even though I never got deep into any of them.

How have your goals and motivations changed over the years?
I have so far made games solo. I don't know if it's that I'm a control freak, or perhaps that I won't have to try to tell people to work, as I don't want to be a boss, especially. It's not very recommended unless you have a lot of time and a lot of life security, neither of which I've ever had.

Completing Noitu Love 2 was a lot of fun, as it was always varied, not tied to a serious story and I somehow made it all in 10-ish months.

Iconoclasts took me almost a decade, though, and that destroyed me in several ways. Pressure to make money. Pressure to finish. Pressure to make such a large chunk of my life feel worth it. I don't have answers to those things even today, I feel, but the game has put me in the ideal place that I originally recommended: I can take my time.

What I feel is more pertinent for me to do now is make what I want, scale back the parts of Iconoclasts that took the longest and just set up a creative environment that isn't rigid. That includes things like not having a story deciding what ideas fit the game, or things that take a long time which I do not enjoy making but end up being necessary. Elaborate cutscenes are an example of that. I think my focus from here on – when I do things solo – will be action games.

Games are weird! Like sports, they are interactive, but they can also tell a story like a book or a movie might. Weirder still, studies have shown they can affect our brains as quickly and directly as drugs and medications can! What do you think games do better than others forms of entertainment, and what kinds of effects do you hope that your games will have on their players?
I would like players to have a good time. That can include the whole gamut of emotions, because experiences are more than laughter and smiles. I still want underlying narratives that affect the player, alongside the adrenaline of a fun battle.

Iconoclasts was my most direct story, and it may remain the only one like that. I can still continue to have metaphors and just have a game's foundation be based on something I have strong feelings toward. In the end, I want people to have a sense that my game was of some sort of visceral importance, out of the hundreds of games they might play.

I believe games encompass all media so far, and have a lot of power because of that. At the end of it all, games do their exclusive feature best, and that is interactivity eliciting reactions. I play other games mostly for that alone, and mainstream games still have a long way to go before they become as successful as other art forms at using their unique traits to their fullest. Indies try harder than others, but they're not all more creative just because they have less of a leash on them.

Iconoclasts stars an adventurous woman exploring a vast, highly interactive world, but unlike Samus, she uses a giant wrench, not a Power Suit, to get the job done. What are some of the things that you did, and did not, want to borrow from the Metroid series when making your game?
I really enjoy Metroid Fusion's range of motion, which has carried on to the Japan-made sequels since. It has many small features added to make you always feel in control, which is appreciated given that there are a lot of things about the 2D feel of a Metroid that is unlike any other platformer. Fixed jumping momentum (save for being able to turn), crouching being toggled in three stages, and so forth. No other game feels exactly like it.

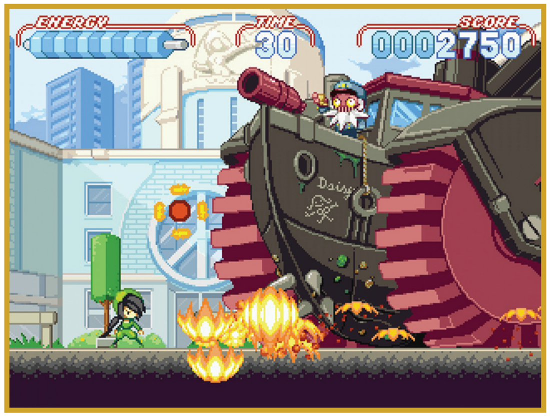
My game did not inherit those two specific things, but playing Metroid Fusion did make me feel inspired to try to remove any input that is needlessly imprecise – to make my game engine know what it is and is not just a gimmick, just like a Metroid. I would have a slight auto-aim on your gun, as well as for when you ground pound enemies, as examples. The game isn't easier because those things are there; the game just feels smoother. You won't have to do tiny jumps to shoot an enemy just slightly above you.

I also really love the storytelling in Super Metroid, but Iconoclasts certainly isn't that minimalist.

JOAKIM'S GAMEOGRAPHY

THE LEGEND OF PRINCESS

Hey, is that Zelda 3's limited-edition pink-haired Link in a free, fan-made spin-off of Zelda 2? Is that . . . *legal?* Fight, platform, and puzzle through a mini-dungeon using weapons like Cuccos, Bombchus and Boomerangs against a horde of foes, including a pig wizard! It's legitimately one of my favorite games in the Zelda, *er,* "Princess" series.

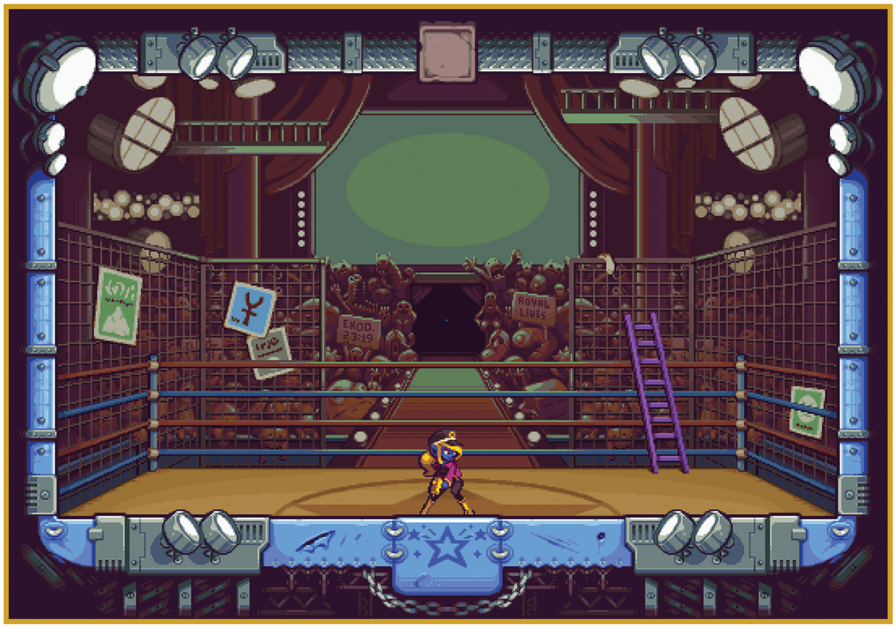


NOITU LOVE 2: DEVOLUTION

First released in 2008, then ported to the 3DS and Wii U in 2016, Noitu Love 2 can stand toe-to-toe with any other 2D action game. Speaking of which, does that boat boss looks familiar? Then you're probably a Shantae fan! WayForward recruited Joakim to work on that series with them, and he brought his signature ship-shaping styles with him!

ICONOCLASTS

Iconoclasts stars Robin, an action mechanic who uses a giant wrench to beat down bad guys and fix the world, and everything she does feels so good. Making the game though? That didn't always feel great. It took Joakim over eight years to finish! But the final result is an icon-and-classic, deserving of a place in every Switch owner's library.



A FIRST GLIMPSE AT WHAT'S NEXT

So what's Joakim making now? Chances are it will be something small-but-replayable, with a laser focus on the parts of games that are just as fun to make as they are to play. Could it be a single-screen action game where you string together massive combos against hordes of enemies, or a run-and-gun shooter that only takes a few hours to blast through? Or maybe something more procedurally generated? The only thing we know for sure is that the upcoming adventure's lead character is this blue-skinned, gun-toting lady, and she sometimes talks to guys with floating brains and eyeballs where their faces should be. With no pressure to make anything in particular, and the freedom to play with his own ideas as they come to him, Joakim's next game is sure to be something special!

You've also been around long enough to see the Metroid series change a lot over the years. What do you think of where it's been, where it's going and, maybe most important, what you might have done with Metroid Dread if you had been the one to make it?
Right now I'm not loving where it's headed. I feel perhaps the team that makes sidescrolling Metroid is headed down a strange path of feeling their gameplay has to be "more interesting," while choosing very tedious ways to do so. The parrying in Samus Returns – and seemingly Dread as well – is the antithesis of what I mentioned before, which was introducing elements to streamline the game. It makes you stop and start all the time, because it is not a clever mechanic. It is an idea they had, and stubbornly changed everything around it, instead of adding it as a move you have simply available. Every enemy now needs a lot more damage dealt to them as to not render the parry useless. So every opponent requires it now. It makes you stop and wait for them to attack rather than skillfully shooting them as you move. It is now entirely made to play out like the developers wanted, but that's not necessarily how you, the player, want it. You don't always get encouraged to execute the moves available to you to play around, to figure out what works and what doesn't. Instead, you have to just follow the prompts. You get stronger weapons eventually for older areas to be faster, but then they reintroduce the same enemies but with new colors to once again require the parry. It is really strange to me that the game is headed in this direction.

Meanwhile, it adds elements for those who get lost, which is nice, but it also adds ammo for crucial moves. Again, the game punishes you for not latching on to some specific, ancillary mechanic by forcing you to spend a mind-numbing amount of time defeating the challenge unless you do. Before, the worst that kind of thing got in Metroid was having to rely on charge shots if your Missiles ran out, and that wasn't nearly as long-winded.

Samus Returns was very repetitive as well, and puzzles were very lock-and-key. So that's my disappointment with the last game, and possibly the upcoming Dread. Metroid Prime 4 I have no idea what they might do. I want things changed up, but am now wary of how they might do that.

There are tons of indie Metroidvanias these days. What do you think it is about the genre that attracts so many indie devs, while apparently repulsing Nintendo and other AAA publishers most of the time?
I mean they don't sell amounts that please stockholders and investors. Nintendo might make a Metroid because they are still a large company that is willing to more frequently make a lower budget game, because it will still come out as profit, and they are less interested in being the largest game in the world with every product. The players and developers that love the genre really love it, however, and I think that's why they make them. It can mix all the elements of RPGs, action platformers and story.

I also believe the side-view game is more appealing aesthetically to more developers than one viewed from higher up, or 3D, both from a preference in detailing characters, and also a simplicity of 2D game design when it comes to controllable and precise actions.

You've made most of your games all by yourself. What are the hardest and, dare I ask, "easiest" things about making a game totally solo?
The easiest is I can do it when I want – nobody is waiting for me. It also becomes the hardest because I can't wait for them to do parts for me.

Your brother is an accomplished film director and your wife is an up-and-coming game artist and designer. Have you ever thought about teaming up with them? It would be awesome to see one of your games show up in Shazam 2, or even see you make a game starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson as Black Adam . . . ?
I want to make a game with my wife Becca Bair once we both have time between projects. I have no hesitation with her and what she would add to my work, as most of all it will finally give me the courage to do something different.

As much as it's neat that my brother makes movies, I am not very interested in licensed game making, hah.

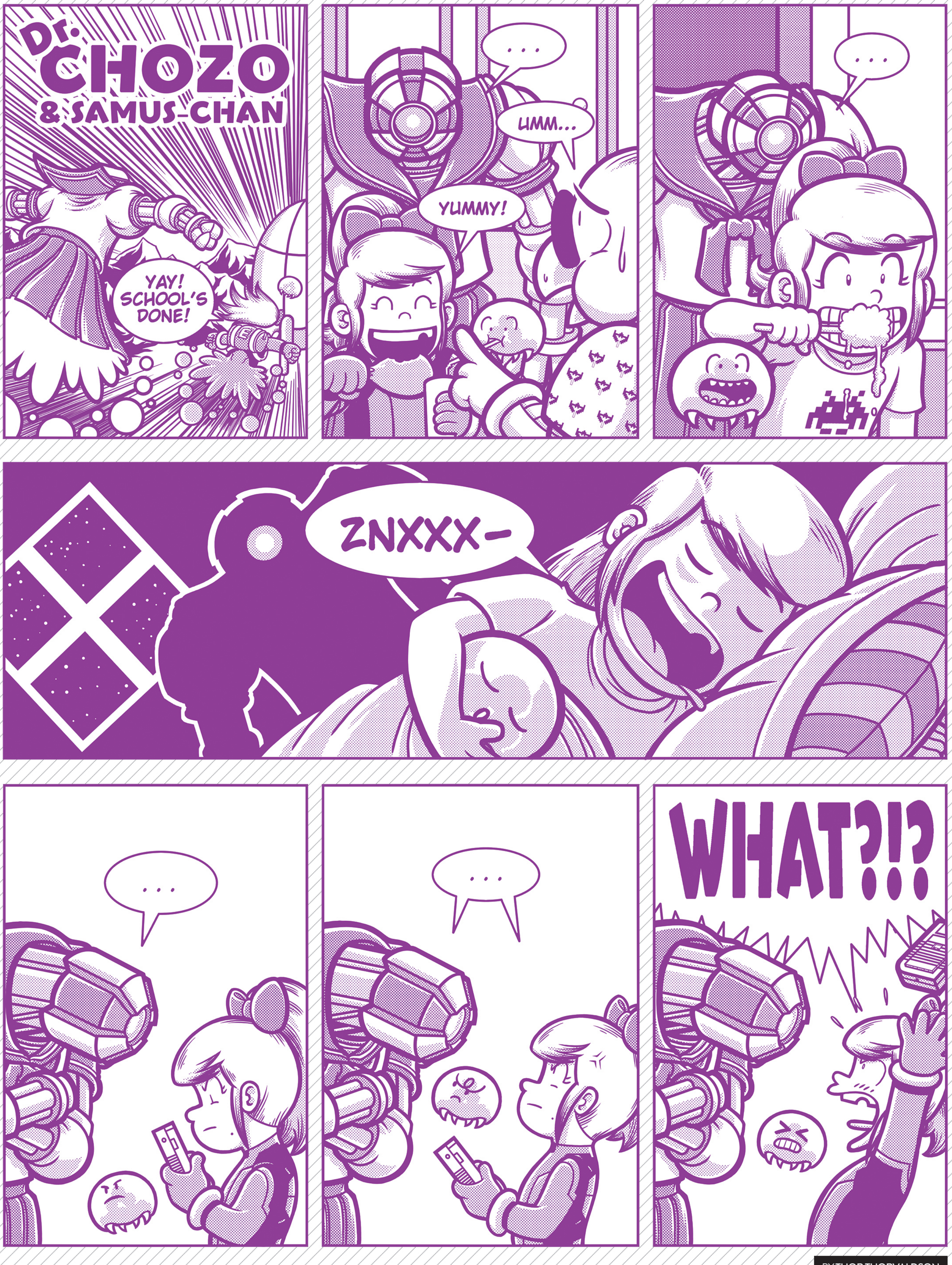
What can you tell us about what you're working on now? (Since it's apparently not a game starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson as Black Adam.)
I've always felt better saying as little as possible about my projects, as I work better from a "feel" point of view than when I start explaining in detail what a game is, in fear of finding the description of the game sounding too silly. I will show off what it is I'm working on in more detail when acceptable videos of it can be made. It is very action-focused as implied before, though.

Any advice for kids looking to get started in game development?
Like everyone else says: Try to start small. Make a game that takes a weekend, or join a game jam. There are many of those now. Don't jump into making a huge game full-time, even with friends along with you. Starting a studio for your first thing is a huge risk, and while the media likes to write about successes, there are hundreds more who failed and lost everything to debt going that route. Make it a hobby, even for a long time, until you're confident in your output and you've learned how you work.

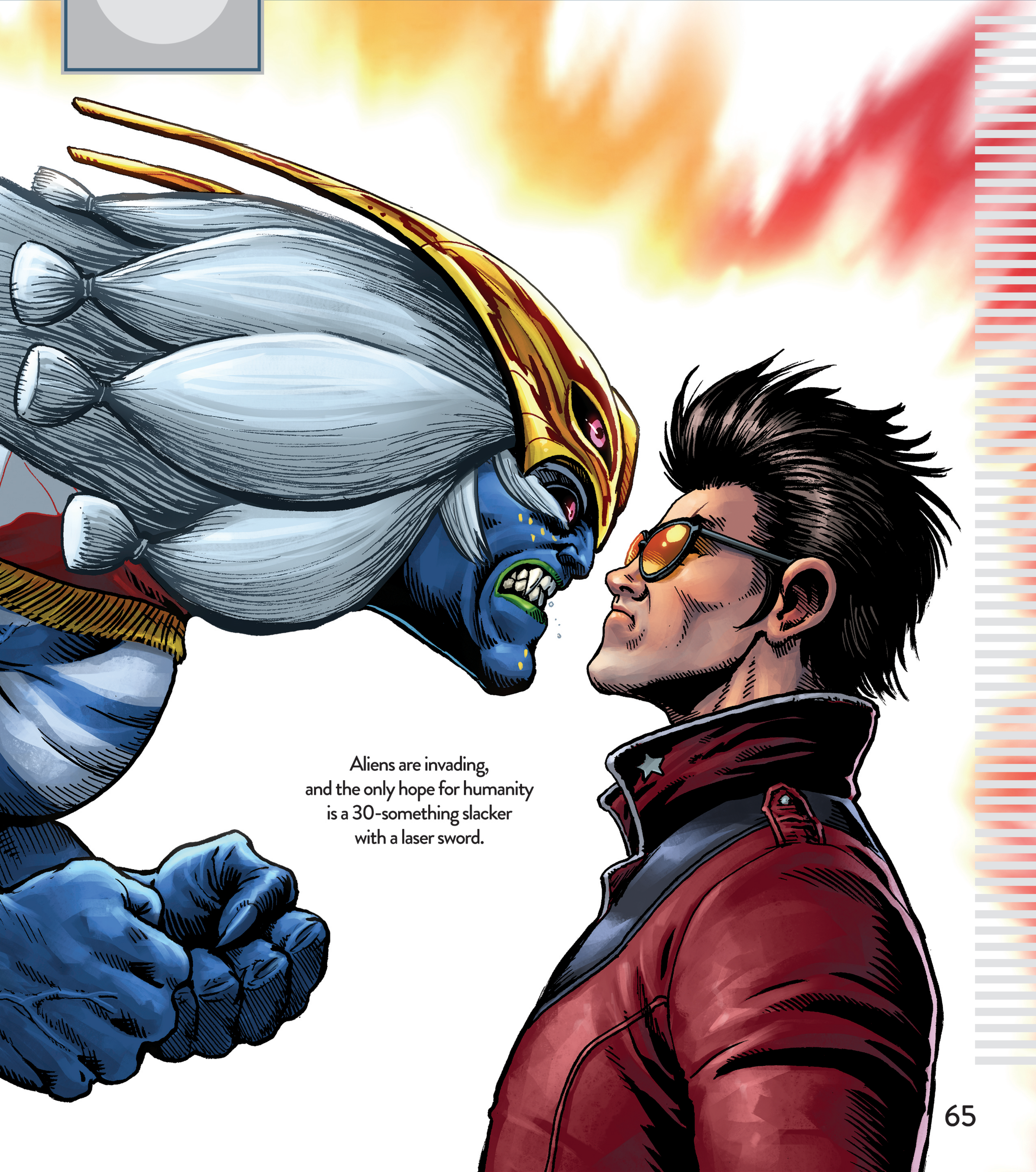
I didn't do things in a sensible way. In the end, you have to have a real need to make games to get through it. Not to make money, but to express yourself. Also never leave friends and loved ones behind in favor of more development time.

If you had an unlimited budget to make a game in any Nintendo universe, which property would you pick and what would you make?
Every time someone says "you should try that" or "I could try to pitch that for you" I start feeling I don't actually want to do it. So while I joke about a Princess Daisy game or whatever else, I think that as long as I can stick to making games without needing a lot of financial support, I won't truly want to work on an IP like that, even if it might be very fun.

Finally, if you could have any superpower, what would you choose and why?
The power to do interviews better, because I don't like to.



BY THOR THORVALDSON



Aliens are invading, and the only hope for humanity is a 30-something slacker with a laser sword.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
RATING: M

The Battle for Planet Earth!

NO MORE HEROES III

THERE ARE 11 kittens hidden in the world of No More Heroes III. That's one for each year since the last numbered entry in the series was released. Is that symbolism? Like a lot of things in this game, it's hard to say. You find them in the open world of Santa Destroy, the city from the first game, now split into five pieces by a self-proclaimed "gosh darn" alien superhero named FU. In reality, he's got more in common with Thanos than Superman, and it's up to Travis Touchdown to stop him.

But he doesn't have to hurry. There's plenty of time to stroll around town and commit some other "heroic" deeds like planting trees, unclogging toilets and saving strays. Once you do get them home, they can really live . . . a little. Their limited animations show the player that No More Heroes III wasn't made with much money, and that the development team stretched their dollars as best they could.

So these virtual cats aren't always impressive to look at, but I love them anyway. In the end, it's the thought that counts, and the thought of Travis, a loner and a rebel, living with 12 cats (including Jeane, the mother of the kittens) means a lot to me. No More Heroes III is a violent adventure, filled with death, destruction and (gasp!) swear words. It is not a pet simulator. Yet, all these kittens are here, presumably because the team loves cats, and they hope we love them too.

That's why I am giving No More Heroes III a near-perfect score.

Thanks for reading my review.

. . .

Wait, you're still here? The cat collecting stuff wasn't enough for you? You think I'm "kitten" when I say that's all you really need to know about the game? Because I'm not! Like a bag of cats, No More Heroes III is positively stuffed with things that many might consider unnecessary, and it's fantastic. Suda51, the writer and co-director of the game, told us a few issues ago that he wanted this new project to be like Rocky 3. I didn't know he meant that literally, but sure enough, there's a scene about 3/4th into the story that's a near shot-for-shot remake of a memorable Rocky 3 moment.

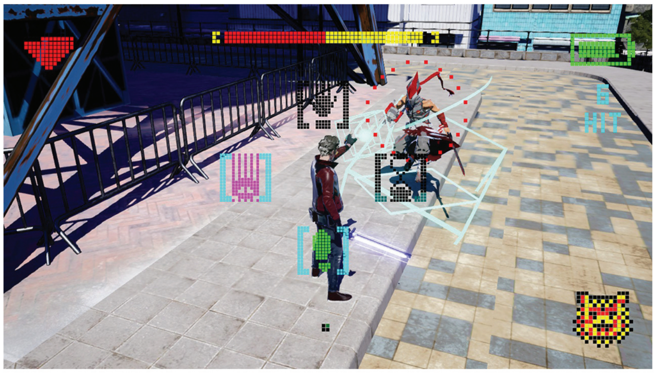
Was it necessary? Nope. Then again, nothing about video games is.

They're just for fun, and if there's one thing that No More Heroes III knows how to do, it's have fun. It's not as heavy as the first one, as efficiently calculated as the second or as blazingly surreal as Travis Strikes Again. Instead, it's more like a party. A celebration of everything that Suda51 loves, including No More Heroes itself.

Punk rock is defined by prioritizing raw emotion over polish. No More Heroes has always followed that style, and this fourth game is no exception. But there are subcategories of punk, and with this third numbered release, the series takes a turn toward pop punk, less like The Sex Pistols and more like The Foo Fighters (or should I say, FU Fighters). Unlike the gritty, frowny bad men and occasional woman of No More Heroes 1 and 2, FU and his flunkies are vibrant, inviting and accessible. Even my 5-year-old loved fighting them, albeit with the difficulty set to "Berry Sweet," the blood set to "Mild" and voice acting turned off so he couldn't hear the swears.

He may be the exception though. No More Heroes III targets adults, even more so than past games in the series. The fighting is much deeper and more complex than before, with an ever-expanding bestiary and coinciding combat techniques to master. There are light and heavy attacks, Death Glove moves like dropkicks and projectile projectors, a dedicated jump button, grapples, charge moves and, maybe most importantly, the dodge. It's a crucial skill that you have to adopt early, as the first few boss fights are some of the hardest in the game.

From there, things get lighter and weirder. If Bayonetta 2 is most similar to Tekken (a sharp, mathematical fighter that rewards long combos),



then No More Heroes III is like Smash Bros. Ultimate, but with items on. That may sound hyperbolic, but if you play until the very end, you'll see that it's true! Just about everyone from the No More Heroes series here, and often-times, everything is in chaos.

Randomness plays a part in both the game's story and its mechanics. While fighting, a slot machine display may pop up, giving you everything from a little extra in-game money to a suit of flying robot armor. Sometimes it's the wheel of fate, not your free will, that matters most.

The unpredictability only grows as the game goes on. Suddenly, you'll be in space blasting some starship-sized enemy. Then, minutes later, you'll be exploring a spooky school from a first-person perspective, facing a boss in turn-based RPG combat or playing a 2D beat-'em-up from 1986! And that's not even getting into the "volunteer job" missions like mining for craft-ore in a volcanic cave, shooting giant alli-gators with a tank or chasing down bad guys on a futuristic motorcycle.

Is any of this explained? No, again! For the most part, you're expected to just hang on and enjoy the ride. Then again, that's how games used to be, right? Super Mario, gaming's original superhero, could uppercut a brick wall and make a mushroom come out. Then if he touched the mushroom, he grew. Why? How? It was never really explained, and that's part of why it was so delightful. Leaving things up to interpretation gives space to players to make the game's story their own.

Depending on how much of his last game you played, Travis' new status as a family man may also surprise you. Figuratively (and maybe literally?) the old Travis is dead, replaced with a person who earnestly lives for others. Sometimes he feels pride in that. Other times, when things go wrong, he's hit hard by guilt and remorse. With fatherhood also comes the urge to look back, to understand how his own childhood shaped him, and some of the things we learn about Travis' past here are nothing short of game-changing. There isn't a ton of this "deeper dad stuff" in the game, but what's there really moved me.

But if you're an old fan of Travis, don't worry. He's still the same media-obsessed otaku he's always been. Whenever he gets the chance, regard-less of if the person he's talking to is grieving, crying or dying, he's sure to start babbling about anime, wrestling, or his new buddy . . . famed film director Takashi Miike?!

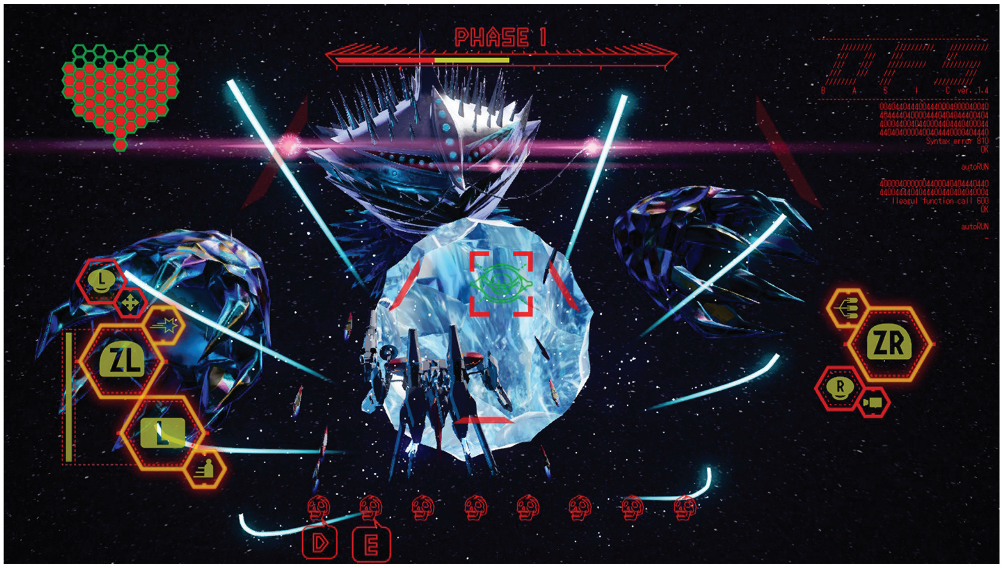
Travis may have family and friends now, including a big-time movie maker, but he's still struggling to really connect with people. There's even a scene where he attempts to "freestyle rap" in order to get through to a pop star who's lost her way. It's incredibly nerdy, but it all works. Travis represents the first generation to grow up with, and eventually grow out of, the "bad boy" era of games, and that makes him more relatable and relevant than ever.

So yeah, No More Heroes III is a violent action game, an open-world do-gooder sim, a dorky dad story and a tribute/parody of "popcorn classic blockbusters" all in one. It can feel like 80 pounds of game stuffed in a 20-pound bag, and it's not always pretty. Everything looks great where it really counts, in combat and cutscenes, but exploring the open world, it some-times feels like you're playing the Wii original again, complete with frame-rate drops and pop-in glitches. There's also a ton of recycling of NPCs, who all wear the same futuristic sailor's uniform?

That will bother some people, but to me, it's all just more evidence that this is a game that probably shouldn't exist; it's disparate parts barely held together with the computer program-ming equivalent of duct tape and elbow grease.

Or maybe it's love – that special connection between Suda and his audience – that's really keeping the game from tearing itself apart. It's the same kind of bond that Travis learns to share with his friends, family, and the whole great big world.

Yeah, I think that's it. If there's one thing that unites all of this game's totally different elements together, it's love. The developers who made No More Heroes III adore this series and its fans, and they wanted to make us happy, so they gave us way too many kittens. I'm really glad that they did.
– JONATHAN



9.5

Jeepers Creepers, Look at all These Reapers

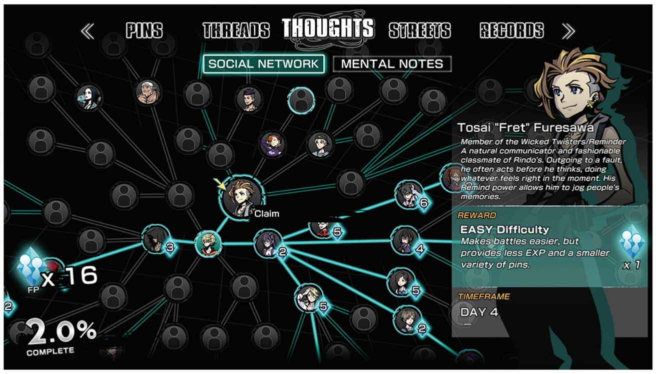
NEO: THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

IT'S FINALLY HERE – after over a decade, we're finally back in Shibuya with NEO: The World Ends with You! Indecisive Rindo Kanade, his upbeat best friend Tosai "Fret" Furesawa and otome game addict Nagi Usui, along with a few other new and old faces, have found themselves unwilling participants in a Reapers' Game where teamwork is the name of the game – but the threat of total erasure, as well as the specter of a vanished Shinjuku, loom over their heads.

Both the real and in-game worlds have changed dramatically since 2008 – a few new real-life landmarks have been added to Shibuya, like Shibuya Hikarie and Shibuya Stream, and some have changed, like Miyashita Park's transformation to a shopping complex. Some of the landmarks that appeared under "generic" names in the original are now appearing under their own names, like the iconic Tower Records or Tokyu Hands department store.

The transition from 2D to 3D environments is nearly perfect, although some of the camera angle changes when navigating through maps are a little awkward. The maps aren't as open as you'd think – there are set paths to travel as indicated on the mini-map in the corner of the screen – but they do a great job at recreating real-world architecture, like the staircases in Spain Hill and the little alleyway off Takeshita Street that hides a pancake restaurant. Cutscenes have characters animated with the thick black lines that are trademarks of their 2D character art, which is a striking design choice, but it leaves some of the characters looking a lot different than their official portraits.

NEO mostly uses the same control scheme as Final Remix, but with a few upgrades. Each character in your party can equip a Pin that has a corresponding button (X, Y, L, R, ZL and ZR),



with a different method of unleashing a Psyche. It sounds confusing – especially when you can unlock the ability to have two Pins assigned to a single button – and it gets a *lot* more complicated when your party size increases!

Did I also mention that there's elemental strengths and weaknesses involved, too? It took a lot of trial and error for me to find the Pin deck combination that not only dealt the most damage but was the easiest on my hands. (I played using a Pro Controller with the Switch in TV Mode.)

The only thing that would've made Pin equipping easier would have been an instant equip option, like the one for your equipment (or Threads) that gives you different options based on different stat boosts.

There's combat against not only regular Noise, but other Players, including some boss battles that employ unique tactics. Reversi addict Susukichi, for example, makes black-and-white discs appear on the battleground that can flip over and injure you. Moments like that set the combat system apart from the original.

Along with an updated version of the Imprinting mechanic, there are some other unique powers in play, which unfortunately come with some drawbacks. Fret's Remind has you tilting the analog sticks to the "sweet spot" to reassemble a scrambled picture, and I'm certain anyone with Joy-Con drift will have a lot of trouble with these. Nagi's Dive is used for both sidequests and in the main quest, and while there's an indicator of your performance on the Chapters menu, I wish that they'd also included icons of the people you needed to interact with. Last but not least, Rindo's power of Rewind is what drives the game: He is able to travel backward and forward to fixed points in time during a day in some chapters. One of NEO's later chapters throws memory loss into the mix, and I loved the structure and wished I could've seen it used more.

However, I thought the story was a lot weaker than the original's, since it was focused on an ensemble cast and their tribulations rather than having a focus on one main character and their coming of age. A lot of party members do have their moments – Rindo trying to find out the truth of his online friend, for example – but a lot of the characters feel extremely one-note. (I'm looking at you, Nagi.) Those who played the original will be very pleased to see a ton of off-screen character development from the various guest stars who make appearances, and it made me smile so much. (And props to Square Enix for pulling off a fake-out regarding a familiar face coming to the rescue!)

The biggest problem I had with NEO was that there was a noticeable difficulty spike right before the endgame that had me grinding for several hours before I could make a return attempt on a difficult boss battle. Luckily, you're able to go back and challenge previous levels with your current party and equipment, just like the original. Rushing had me missing out on a ton of unlockable buffs that would have made things a lot easier if I had only sought them out in the first place.

Buffs are unlocked on a huge social network map of the entire cast – including NPCs, store clerks and people on the street – and you may have to get to know several people before finally connecting to the one that offers the buff you want. It's a neat concept, but it requires a lot of work.

The soundtrack is once again phenomenal. Even though a lot of the tracks are remixes, many of them are radically different (OWARI-HAJIMARI – NEO Mix is one *awesome* example that gives the original lyrics a rock anthem backing), but there were instances when a few songs overstayed their welcome. I would've liked an option to make a custom playlist for battles.

While the Trends system from the original (where you could manipulate a brand's influence to give you combat bonuses) is no longer in play, there are still tons of fashion brands in and around Shibuya, all named after the animals of the lunar zodiac, with "bonus" brands Gatto Nero and froggy panic added to the mix.

As much as I enjoyed NEO, there were a few aspects that worked against it: the characters, the difficulty levels and the time between installments. It's a great action RPG, but it was made for the TWEWY fan in mind, so if you've never played the original, do that first and see if it's up your alley before diving into this sequel. And if you are a TWEWY fan, what are you waiting for? Pick up a Player Pin and dive into the UG! **– REBECCA**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

Trust in the Heart of the Cards

SHADOWVERSE: CHAMPION'S BATTLE

THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL about the combination of a strategic collectible card game and an engaging anime storyline. The strategy makes you think. The characters make you smile. And the plot propels you forward to master the game!

We've seen it before with the Dragon Ball Heroes, Bakugan Battle Brawlers and Yu-Gi-Oh! franchises and the many video games that have spawned from them. Now we can add Cygames' Shadowverse: Champion's Battle to that list!

The game fuses together Cygames' popular collectible card game Shadowverse, which first released in 2016 on PC and mobile platforms, with characters and storylines from its anime television series. The result truly combines the best of both worlds in this Nintendo Switch exclusive.

In Shadowverse: Champion's Battle, you begin your journey as a teenage male or female protagonist who's just moved to a city where Shadowverse is king. Many of the residents play the game; you can buy the cards in multiple areas of the city, and it even has a stadium totally dedicated to Shadowverse!

You discover the game while attending school at Tensei Academy and are tasked with saving its Shadowverse Club from being disbanded permanently. This goal sends you on a journey from Shadowverse rookie to playing side by side with the pros, and it was fun to take on the role of a rising star.

To get there, you have to learn Shadowverse, and the game starts out by introducing you to the basics. If you aren't used to card games like this, the game provides good explanations of the mechanics and a "hint" button you can use during matches if you get stuck.

In Shadowverse, two leaders face off with 20 defense points, and whoever reaches zero first loses. Each leader starts the game with one Play Point orb – the currency used to play cards – and those increase over the course of the match. You gain one on your first turn, two on your second and so on.

The cards include Followers, which can cause damage and evolve into stronger versions of themselves, and Spells and Amulets, which have numerous effects, from destroying cards to summoning Followers. These are the basic mechanics, and the next step is finding the playstyle and class that suits you.

This is where Shadowverse: Champion's Battle truly shined for me. The game features seven types of decks you can build, and possibilities and strategies abound with them.

For example, a Forestcraft deck typically relies on spamming low-cost Fairy cards to defeat your opponent quickly, while a Dragoncraft deck has you bide your time for several turns until you reach Overflow and can execute more powerful effects from your dragon-themed cards.

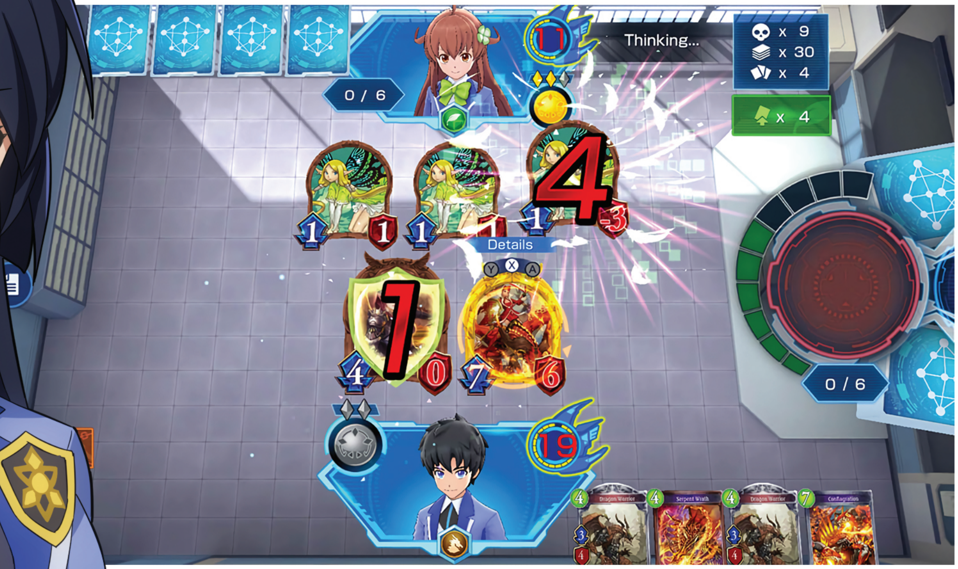
You can't mix and match different types of cards among the decks, but you can acquire neutral cards that can be added to any deck. Each style of deck has its strengths and weaknesses, but getting to experiment with them never got stale. I played through the beginning of the game with Dragoncraft, but by the end, I had Dragoncraft, Runecraft, Swordcraft and Forestcraft decks.

Shadowverse: Champion's Battle throws you into the thick of it, giving you several cards without much guidance on how to build a deck. Thankfully, the game's Deck Code mechanic helped with the learning curve.

Throughout the game, you can duel other characters and receive their Deck Codes if you beat them. A Deck Code includes all the cards needed for it, so you can build it yourself or build part of it and replace any cards you'd like. Not only did this make the game easier at the outset, but I found myself wanting to collect all the Deck Codes I could find to see what my options were and to test out my deck against them.

Shadowverse: Champion's Battle also keeps it simple when it comes to getting the cards you need for specific decks. At the beginning, you're given several card packs to start your collection, and each duel and quest rewards

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MARVELOUS (XSEED)
DEVELOPER: CYGAMES
RATING: T



you with cards and currency to buy more cards and card packs.

The cards themselves have a beautiful anime-inspired art style, and they speak or have sound effects when you play them. Legendary cards even have their own cutscenes! I really enjoyed and respected the work and detail it took to do this for more than 600 cards.

After you learn the mechanics and find your playstyle, the real challenge begins. The game stops going easy on you once you reach the story's halfway point. There are some big difficulty spikes that appear. While I never felt like the difficulty was egregious or unfair, it also didn't help the latter half of the game's excessive grind that it puts you through to advance the story.

The game introduces a new area called the Underverse in its later chapters, and I think it should've been saved exclusively for post-game content. At this point, you're getting close to the climax in the story, and the game instead has you grind through this new area, playing numerous duels and difficult bosses. It killed the story's momentum, and while the narrative is second to gameplay in this game, I think its pacing could've been handled better.

The story's first half and conclusion really work well, though, thanks to the charming cast of characters. I wasn't expecting a lot of depth from them, but the game allows you to get to know them better throughout the story via optional bonding events, and they have some sweet story arcs.

A few include the protagonist and Kai Ijuin teaming up to solve mysteries around the school, total Shadowverse fanboy Hiro Ryugasaki thinking about giving up the game due to his ailing grandfather and student Mimori Amamiya branching out as an actress in a neighborhood play.

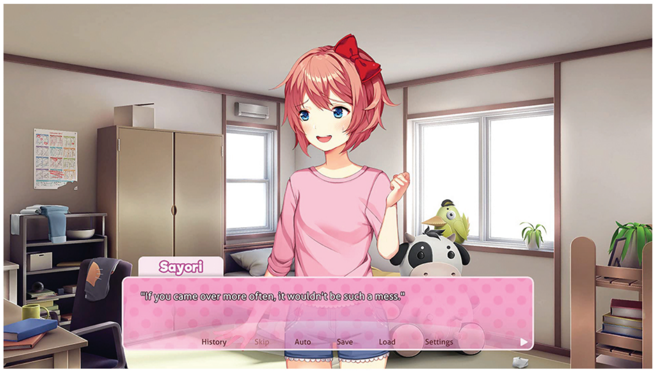
These moments also serve to vary the gameplay. Even though you solve most of the cast's struggles through matches of Shadowverse, the bonding moments provide some needed variety as you progress through the story.

Once you've completed the main story, there's post-game content in single player and multiplayer for up to two people. You can duel others online or face off locally. I tested out the online multiplayer with a friend, and it went smoothly. Plus, it offers more decks and strategies to encounter after you've taken on everyone in the single player portion.

Playing through this game brought me back to my childhood, when I played the Pokémon Trading Card Game and Yu-Gi-Oh! The Sacred Cards on my old Game Boys. We haven't seen many collectible card games like those on the Switch in recent years, but Shadowverse: Champion's Battle fits their mold well. So, if you're longing for that anime card game experience, give it a try and get ready to duel!

– MAGGIE

8.0



Join the Club!

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB PLUS!

OF ALL THE summer Nintendo Switch release announcements, Doki Doki Literature Club Plus! stood out as one of the most surprising, given that it's one of the more (in)famous free-to-play titles of the past few years. This critically acclaimed title, first released on PC in 2017 by Team Salvato, appears to be a run-of-the-mill anime rom-com visual novel with *moe* characters and hormone-fueled hijinks at first glance – but it's not. It's actually one of the most disturbing and thought-provoking horror games you'll ever experience, wrapped up in a sugary outer shell.

Your role is a typical male high schooler in a typical anime-inspired high school club setting, where you're surrounded by adorable girls: your childhood friend Sayori, prickly manga lover Natsuki, shy bookworm Yuri and Monika, the upbeat club president. It's almost time for the school festival, and Monika wants the club to put on a poetry jam, so she assigns everyone to write poems for each other to read and critique.

Here's where the gameplay comes in: You're presented with lists of words, and the words you choose (some innocuous, some . . . disturbing) influence the friendship levels between you and the girls. You might even get them to open their hearts to you! Eventually, the story reaches a point of no return after making a choice in a previous game day. You try to reload the save, but an error window pops up and you need to restart . . . and that's when things get worse. *Much, MUCH worse.*

Your experience may vary, especially if you're someone who may be affected by what's listed in the content warnings, but I came away from my first playthrough thoroughly entertained by the overall design of the storytelling. My favorite sequence (if you could call it that) is when you're forced into a situation that you can't escape. Not even reloading a save, closing the game in the Switch's main menu or doing a full restart of the console will take you out of it! Instead, you have to sit through it over an entire weekend of in-game time. And that's when things get *worser than worse.*

For those who've played DDLC's original PC version, the "Plus!" designation adds some additional heartwarming side story prequels for the four girls, along with a Windows-style interface that takes the place of the computer you'd normally play DDLC on. There are also image galleries, a jukebox and other stuff that you probably shouldn't be poking around in. Both controller and touchscreen controls are supported, but the touchscreen controls can be a bit finicky. (I mostly played using a Pro Controller.) Also included are content warnings, which can be activated during the warning sequence at the beginning of the game or any time later from the Options menu: A message box with a brief description will appear at the beginning of a scene with potentially sensitive content.

The only part of the game I found disappointing is that one of the main girls, Natsuki, doesn't get an in-game "arc" to herself, so to speak. (You do learn a little bit more about her in the side stories, however.) Also, even with the addition of the side stories, DDLC is still on the short side – expect a full playthrough to clock in at less than eight hours. You'll still be talking about it and digging for secrets in the days to come, though.

If you're a mature gamer (I can't recommend this game to anyone still in high school, considering some of the subject matter that gets explored within) and you're looking for a horror story that doesn't depend on cheap shots or jump scares to entertain, then I'd suggest joining the Doki Doki Literature Club. You know you want to – just look at Monika! You can't say no to that face, can you? **– REBECCA**

8.5

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: SERENITY FORGE
DEVELOPER: TEAM SALVATO
RATING: M

. . . or Join This Club Instead!

WORLD'S END CLUB

RIGHT OFF THE BAT, if you don't like anime, this game is not for you. If that isn't a deal-breaker, let's dive in!

You start off with an intriguing premise. The whole cast is assembled and ready to face down what appears to be the final boss. After you inevitably lose that battle, things take a strange turn, as the entire visual style changes from colorful anime to something far more lifelike and disturbing.

You're now seeing a classroom full of realistically proportioned kids being terrorized by a cel-shaded jester-like creature. As the camera pans out, this turns out to be a movie that the kids you started the game with were watching on a bus. Then some sort of meteor strikes the ground and you all wake up in an underwater theme park being held captive by that same jester creature you just saw in the movie!

Each character gets assigned a task – but the trick is nobody knows what their own task is. Everyone is wearing wristbands with someone else's task on them, and the first person to accomplish their task wins their freedom, while everyone else gets devoured by a giant robot.

So yes, it's pretty convoluted, but it's genuinely fascinating as you start working your way through who you can and can't trust, and why some of your friends are acting out of character. This, however, isn't what the game is really about. About an hour in, the wristband plot ends and the rest of the adventure becomes a post-apocalyptic story about friendship told through a road trip to Tokyo!

World's End Club is about 75% visual novel and 25% platform action. The plot itself is quite interesting, but unfortunately the writing and voice acting aren't up to the same caliber.

This game's dialogue is a shining example of why a lot of anime fans hate English dubs. Some of the voices are fine, but the vast majority of the storytelling can be pretty hard to swallow. The good news is, the story it struggles to tell is good enough to at least partially make up for the less-than-stellar way it's told.

As for the cast, it consists of a parade of very well trodden anime archetypes. There's a chubby coward who loves food. There's an extremely loud little girl who shouldn't be underestimated. There's a nerdy kid who constantly fiddles with his glasses, a brash loudmouth with a baseball cap, etc., etc. This isn't to say these characters are bad, but if you have any history with JRPGs or anime, you've seen these people before.

Then there's the gameplay, which can best be described as "clunky."

In addition to basic platforming fare like running, jumping and climbing, each character eventually gets a magical power, like putting up a barrier or throwing objects. It all works more or less as intended, but it never once feels fun to perform any physical tasks. The visual style may be sharp and remarkably well executed, but everyone's animations and movements are painfully stiff. The attempt at adding variety to the gameplay is admirable, but the unpolished feel of the action sequences just drags the whole experience down.

World's End Club is more interesting than it is traditionally "good," so how much you're able to invest in this kind of story will determine how much enjoyment you'll be able to get out of your time with it. When you really break it down, most aspects of the game leave a lot to be desired, but for the right audience, World's End Club will be more than the sum of its parts.
– KRIS

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: IZANAGIGAMES
RATING: T

Monstrum Party

YS IX: MONSTRUM NOX

I BECAME AN Ys fan a few years ago, when Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of DANA blew my expectations away. An epic adventure of exploration across the expanse of a vibrant tropical island, it fused gorgeous scenery together with killer music and energetic combat to make a total package that quickly became – and still is – one of my favorite games on the Switch. While concluding my review back in NF #36, I said YS VIII had established a new foundation that the developers at Nihon Falcom could build on in the future.

And so they have! Ys IX: Monstrum Nox is a direct follow-up that splashes a fresh coat of paint on several of the gameplay elements of VIII, then introduces a few new ideas of its own.

This time around, seasoned adventurer Adol Christin enters Balduq, a mysterious city built around a massive prison. Being imprisoned then quickly becomes a central theme, as Adol is jailed, but even when he breaks out he becomes cursed and rendered unable to leave the confines of the city itself.

Oh, and the curse also transforms him into a Monstrum! Kind of like the X-Men, Monstrums are the set-apart few in Balduq society who each have a special superpower – but that difference also makes them distrusted by the normal townsfolk, and they're constantly being hunted by local law enforcement.

Adol's goal becomes figuring out a way to break this curse so he and his pal Dogi (the only returning NPC from past games) can leave Balduq and get back to their world-traveling ways. But he's in no real rush, as his Spider-Man-like new superpower proves useful in helping the people of the city, so he dedicates himself to being a good citizen while he's not allowed to leave.

Pieces of the Ys VIII gameplay loop that return here are Adol venturing out, meeting new NPCs and bringing them home to a central hub (last time it was Castaway Village; this time it's a bar called The Dandelion), and the Raid battles, recontextualized as fights against the "Lemures" (beings of pure darkness living in kind of a parallel dimension within the city). Both of these elements work well in this encore appearance.

Not as good the second time around? Exploration. Ys VIII's island setting often let you freely roam in huge, open areas. Ys IX does the exact opposite, intentionally restricting your movements to small chunks of the city at a time. You have to open up other areas one at a time by completing quests, filling up a "Nox Meter" and then vanquishing a ton of Lemures in a grand, decisive battle. It's another fine loop, but I preferred the go-anywhere freedom of the previous game.

Also lacking in comparison to its immediate predecessor is visual variety in the environments. Ys VIII had beaches and forests and caves and mountains and swamps . . . Ys IX has Balduq. Just the one big city. You do eventually get to break free to explore some of the surrounding land, but the majority of the environments here are built from various hues of brick and stone.

This is especially true of the giant prison that serves as the nexus of this quest. You revisit it again and again, constantly infiltrating it to rescue new allies or to uncover information, using new points of ingress each time. I get that the prison is central to the story, and it wouldn't make sense for the same large structure to have visible differences in its construction across its vast expanse, but running through same-looking stone corridors over and over does get old after a while.

Restricted exploration and lacking visual variety are my only knocks against Ys IX, though. On the whole, this is a great sequel that I feel I was right to eagerly look forward to!

Its cast of characters is great, and the fact that each one brings a new navigation-enhancing superpower to your party when you recruit them is great. (See the next page for a breakdown of each one.)

The soundtrack is still sensational. The music just goes *hard* when you're cruising through a dungeon slashing enemies to bits – you can't help but feel your heart start pumping a bit faster. It's honestly amazing.

And the story legitimately shocked me! A plot twist that comes in fairly early on made my jaw hit the floor, and I was so invested in wanting to solve the mysteries of what was really going on in Balduq after that point. Another excellent aspect.

Taken all together, Ys IX is a great game and a worthy follow-up to VIII. I'd recommend playing VIII first, but if you like that one, play this! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RATING: T

IX

SPIDER ZIPPING
CRIMSON KING

Ys IX boasts six playable characters, each of whom possesses a unique power that increases your ability to explore Balduq. Series hero Adol gets "Crimson Line" – it lets him zip to specific target points on rooftops, high in trees and the like!

FELINE CLIMBING
WHITE CAT

Adol's first ally in this adventure is the White Cat, a young woman whose power is called "Heaven's Run." It lets her run straight up sheer vertical walls, which pairs perfectly with the fact that Balduq has so many of them around!

WINGED GLIDING
HAWK

Anger management is not a priority for this young man, whose ferocity in battle is fueled by pure rage! His temper is checked when he's alone above the city, though, gliding silently from roof to roof with his power, "Hunter's Descent."

SIGHT BEYOND SIGHT
DOLL

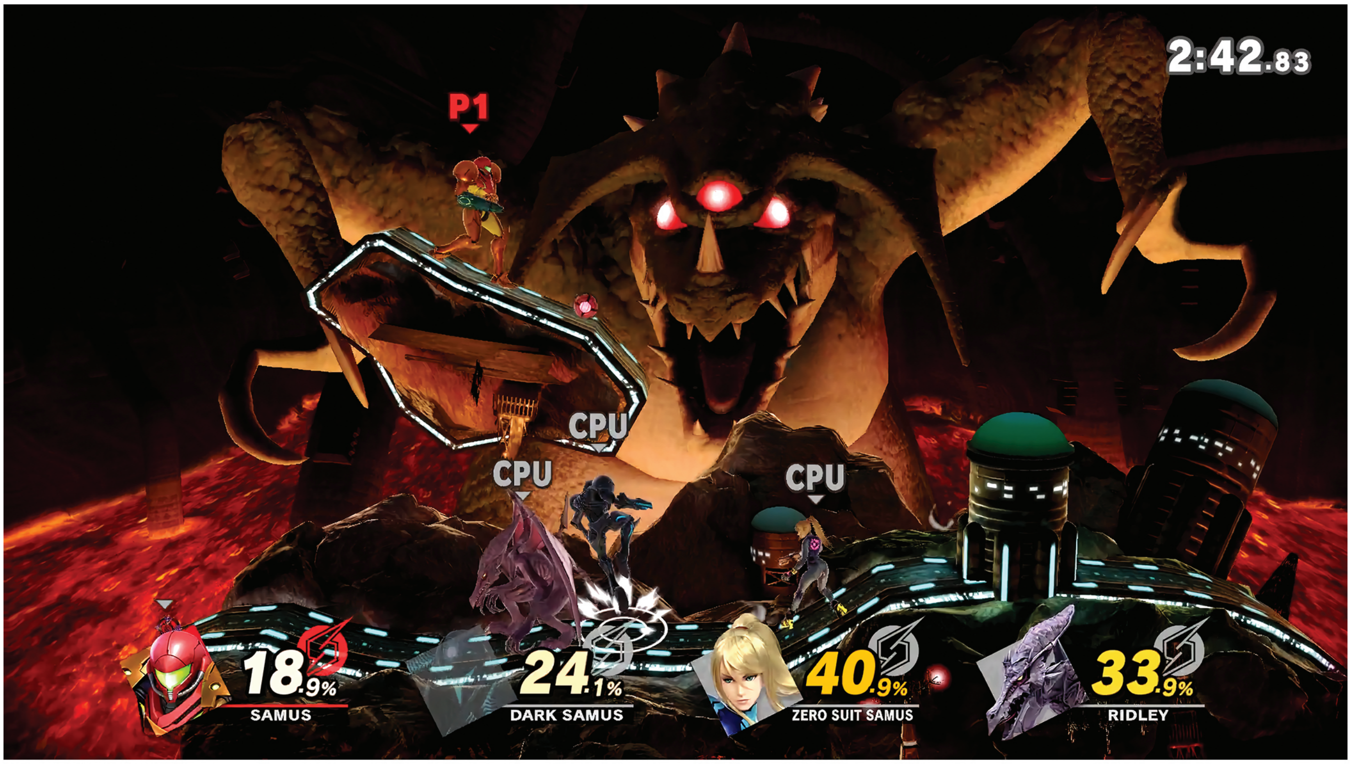
When the enigmatic Doll joins the party, it's not a movement power she brings to the team, but rather a vision boost! Her Monstrum Gift is called "Third Eye" and it works a bit like x-ray vision, letting you spots secrets and foes behind walls.

SMASHING!
RAGING BULL

You know, compared to Hawk, the level of rage exhibited by Raging Bull is pretty tame! She does like to take out her pent-up aggression on giant stone barriers from time to time, though, smashing them with her "Valkyrie Hammer" power.

SHADOW SNEAKING
RENEGADE

Finally, the somewhat softspoken sixth Monstrum sees his nature reflected in his power, as his "Shadow Dive" lets him silently sneak past enemies without being attacked, as well as fit under low barriers that would block the others!



Create Your Own Graphical Upgrade?

THE MCLASSIC

A COUPLE OF years ago, the video wizards at Marseille launched a new little device called the mClassic. It's a tiny dongle that you plug an HDMI cable into – it intercepts the video signal, applies some extra processing to the picture and then sends it back out again via a second HDMI cable that's plugged into your TV. It's meant to give a visual boost to your video game systems, creating better final image quality on the screen versus what the systems alone are capable of creating.

I was intrigued! Especially after a few prominent YouTubers like NF #35 interviewee Nintendrew gave the device some pretty glowing praise. I held off on pulling the trigger to buy one for myself, though – first because of its lofty MSRP ($99.99) and second because I figured Nintendo would be bringing out their rumored Switch Pro soon anyway, so I might as well wait for that.

Years later, we're still waiting for that Pro to appear. So Marseille has started pushing the mClassic as an alternative solution once again – including sending me a review unit for me to finally try out. It's a little late for first impressions of a two-year-old dongle device, but this is my personal experience with the mClassic:

Meh.

My apologies to Marseille and my thanks to them for sending the test unit, but this dongle just doesn't work for me. Literally, at first! I actually struggled to get my TV to even accept its pass-through HDMI signal.

I bought a brand-new TV recently, a 2021 model, so it absolutely should have been up to the task of interpreting the signals being sent its way. But with the mClassic active in-between the Switch and the screen, it suffered. The main menu was fine, so the video was going through, but then I fired up Smash Ultimate and the video started going full black every few seconds. It was unplayable.

Remembering Nintendrew's advice that the device was better suited for older game systems, I next hooked up my old GameCube to try that. It failed again. The TV wouldn't see the signal.

Taking the new TV out of the equation, I moved my experiments to my old TV to try there. It worked . . . but then it introduced a terrible buzz in the audio. Unplayable again.

Finally, after fiddling around and flicking its switch on and off for half an hour or more, I at last achieved a stable video signal and no audio buzz and was able to play some games. I could notice that Super Smash Bros. appeared to be improved a bit, in a subtle way, and I spent part of my time running through Ys IX with the mClassic enabled as well, and in that game the environments appeared softer. But better? I wouldn't really say it was better than not having it turned on. It just looked slightly different. It was a very mild change.

Ultimately, I'm glad that my 2019 self exercised restraint with his wallet and didn't take the plunge on a $99.99 purchase of this device. I'm sure there is some truly impressive technical magic happening inside its stylish housing, and it's imperceptibly fast, as I never noticed any lag being introduced while using it. But the end result is far too subtle to make the whole ordeal of finagling it to work anywhere near worthwhile.

And so the mClassic is no magic solution, and it won't turn your Switch into a Pro. Be patient. Nintendo will make that upgrade happen eventually.
– LUCAS

5.0

HARDWARE | PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MARSEILLE

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Contra: Rogue Corps	7.0	David	#43
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age – Definitive Edition	9.5	Lucas	#43
Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition	8.0	Kevin C.	#46
Ghostbusters: The Video Game Remastered	7.5	Brett	#43
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Indivisible	7.0	Tony	#47
John Wick Hex	7.5	Chris	#51
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Langrisser I & II	8.5	David	#46
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition	8.5	Brett	#45
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
Moving Out	8.0	Lucas	#47
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	9.0	Brett	#43
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay!	8.5	Lucas	#51
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX	8.0	Lucas	#46
Pokémon Shield	9.0	Thor	#44
Pokémon Sword	8.0	Lucas	#44
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
Rune Factory 4 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#46
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury	10	Lucas	#51
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening	9.5	Jonathan	#43
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Nintendo Switch Lite	9.0	Matthew L.	#43
The Outer Worlds	8.0	Matthew L.	#47
The Sega Genesis Mini	9.0	David	#43
The Wonderful 101: Remastered	9.0	Jonathan	#47
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore	7.5	Matthew L.	#46
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Trials of Mana	8.5	Brett	#47
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	9.0	Tony	#43

THIRD OPINION
METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

THIS OFFICIAL WORK was released in 2017, just about a year after AM2R, a fan game that drew from the same source material. And while this Nintendo-published product had more polish, I preferred AM2R.

Does that leave me worried about where Dread is headed? Not in the slightest!

My problems with Samus Returns have nothing to do with how well it's made, and everything to do with its attitudes toward the player, and how they don't gel with what Metroid means to me. As game designer Joakim Sandberg (interviewed on Page 61) told us, Samus Returns works you out in the wrong ways. In an attempt to show off Samus' skill at melee combat, it persistently pressures her to pre-plan a parrying punch against opponents.

Originally, Metroid was about discovering new ways to navigate alien encounters. Samus Returns' parry-happy combat squashes that mystery, and with it, the spirit of experimentation. Enemies flash white before they attack, signaling you to counter, and also reminding you that these creatures aren't really alive – they're just video game characters designed to trigger specific responses. It can feel like the game is playing you instead of the other way around.

Still, when you get used to the fact that Samus Returns' combat has more in common with Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! than Metroid Prime, it's a fun jaunt through a classic chapter in Aran's story. The fully redesigned battle against the Metroid Queen, and its newly disorienting-but-engaging camera switches, is especially memorable. It's almost insulting to the queen that they tacked on a battle against a certain purple dragon-man at the very end, but what can you do? The fans demanded Ridley, and more than anything, Samus Returns tries to appeal to her fans, regardless of if they know her from her own games, or just from crossovers like Smash Bros.

The same goes for Metroid Dread. It still has the melee counter, which will resonate with Smash players, but it also extrapolates on the fantastic stealth segments of Metroid Fusion and Zero Mission. Finding inventive methods to run and hide from over-powered enemies is more in line with Metroid's strengths than being constantly cued to smack extra-terrestrial wildlife in the face. Dread seems to understand that better than Samus Returns did, a game that sometimes struggles to let Samus go her own way. **– JONATHAN**

9.0 MATTHEW T.

9.5 LUCAS

8.0 JONATHAN

FAN GAME REVIEW

Skippy the Bot

A spin-off of a remake of Metroid II? Why not!

BACK IN 2016, Metroid fans around the world were enjoying a brilliant remake of the Game Boy adventure Metroid II: Return of Samus – but it wasn't Nintendo's Metroid: Samus Returns on the 3DS! (That official remake didn't launch until the following year.) The game that beat the Big N to the punch was the fan-made PC project AM2R, or "Another Metroid 2 Remake," made by hobbyist programmer Milton "DoctorM64" Guasti.

AM2R was a wonderful reimagining of Samus' old quest to exterminate Metroids in the depths of their homeworld, Planet SR388, as Milton breathed vibrant life into the four-color source material, fleshing out the environments with new, detailed backgrounds and making the enemies who inhabited the planet more energetic than ever before. One "enemy" stood out from all the others, though: the helpful explosive-hauling hopper bot, Skippy!

During a brief minigame sequence placed in the middle of AM2R, players lose control of Samus for a while and instead take command of an awkward-jumping Autoad (who came to be known as Skippy by the fandom). Skippy picks up a few bombs, hops past a few obstacles to toss them and destroys three barriers in Samus' path, then explodes and is never seen again.

Well, that brief appearance was enough to make Skippy a star among the AM2R community, and those fans began calling for a Skippy spin-off! Now Milton, a total legend, has actually delivered it: Skippy the Bot, a free PC game you can either download or play in your internet browser.

Skippy the Bot is totally unlike any other Metroid-related game ever seen before, as it's a full-on physics platformer! You have to guide the heroic crab-like bot through obstacle courses and past spike traps to reach each level's end goal.

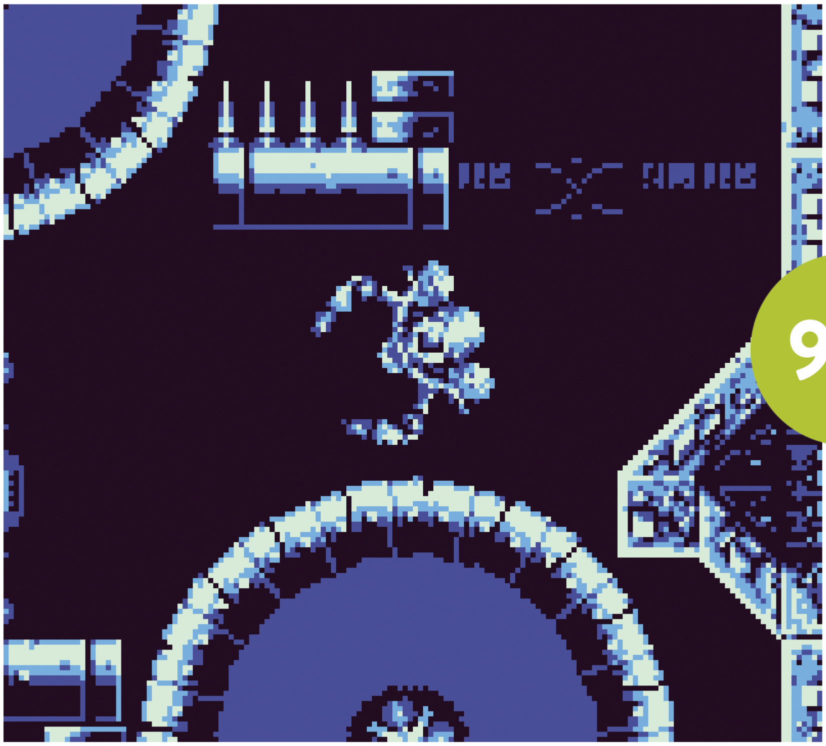
The problem is that Skippy moves so weirdly! He has just two little claw-like legs that you control independently, and you have to master the madness of getting them to work in tandem to jump Skippy over walls, duck him under spinning blades, rotate his body to bash into movable blocks and more. It's difficult, but not frustratingly so, as this is the kind of game in which failure is funny and deaths are not too punishing – you're only sent backward a short distance if you accidentally cause poor Skippy to explode.

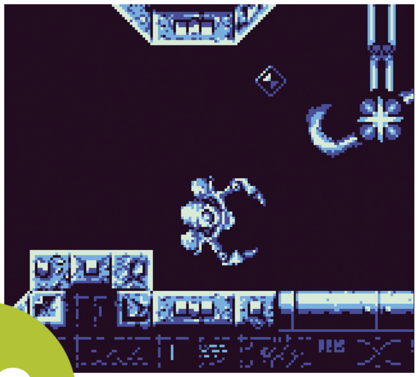
The whole game is only 10 short levels long, so it will probably take most players just 10 to 20 minutes to see it through to the end. But hey, it's totally free and was made purely for fun to share with the AM2R community to celebrate that game's five-year anniversary! You can't complain about the price tag.

And it even has some replay value, as there are 30 floating gems placed throughout the levels, so you can try to collect 'em all – as you're trying to drive down your completion time, too!

Skippy the Bot is such a fun acknowledgement of the support and love AM2R has received over the years. Thanks, Doc! You didn't have to! **– LUCAS**

DoctorM64.itch.io/SkippyBot





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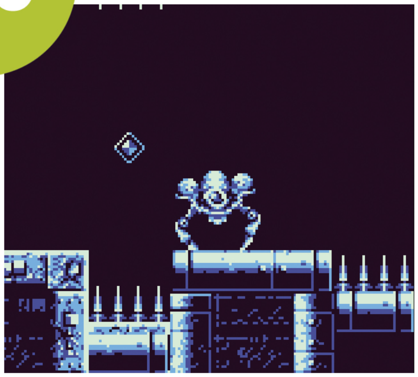


PREVIEW

SUPER MUTTROID?

Take a first look at the GBA-bound Goodboy Galaxy!

WE'VE SEEN A feline spin on Samus before, both through the "Mewtroid" minigames that have popped up in the WarioWare series and 2019's indie hit Gato Roboto. But has a dog ever donned the Power Suit? If not, one will soon!

Goodboy Galaxy is a brand-new Game Boy Advance game now in development that stars a very good boy indeed: a happy little pupper named Maxwell. With his tail wagging and his tongue always sticking out, Max explores alien worlds in search of any treasure or technology that might help his home planet, which is on the brink of total environmental collapse!

The game is currently being Kickstarted as this issue is wrapping up, and it's already blown way past its funding goal and eclipsed the extra amounts set for stretch goals as well. That means that, in addition to hitting GBA, the finished product will also get ports to PC and the Switch as well!

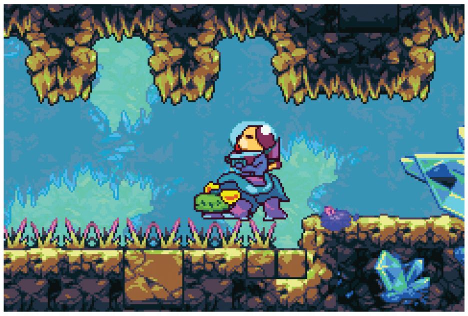
But having Game Boy Advance as the core version is almost unheard of. Plenty of new NES and original Game Boy games have appeared in recent years, and even a few Game Boy Color projects. But Goodboy Galaxy is the first GBA game made for commercial release in 13 years!

It also plays wonderfully well. The dev team – comprised primarily of just two members, Rik Nicol and Jeremy Clarke – has made a demo available in conjunction with the Kickstarter campaign. It's a "pay what you want" preview available on the game's main website.

And it's great! Maxwell is fun to control, as he bops along with his blaster, his jetpack and his auto-regenerating shield, which saves him from a single hit. (But take two hits too soon after each other and he's toast!)

The environment he explores is bewildering in its construction – many corridors loop back around on themselves, making a map screen probably impossible to include! You'll set off from your starship at the start, for example, head directly to the right, then somehow end up back at your starship. And that's just the first instance of getting lost in loops!

Rik and Jeremy say that Goodboy Galaxy is inspired mostly by Metroid and Cave Story, but it's clear that it's got plenty of its own unique ideas at work as well. I'd encourage any fans of either of those inspirations to check out the demo, then dust off your old GBA to get ready for the final version, due next year! **– LUCAS**



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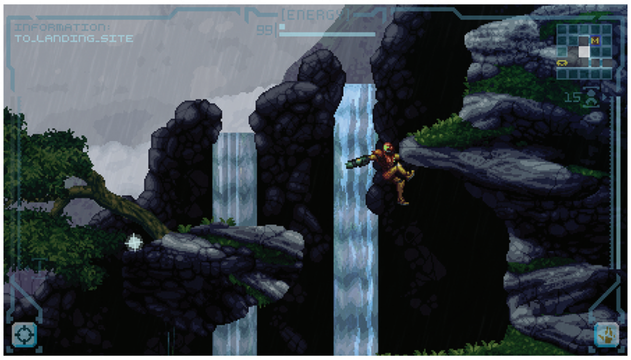

FAN GAME REVIEW

Metroid Prime 2D Demo

The latest Samus game that Nintendo doesn't want you to play.

HISTORY HAS REPEATED itself. Just as the release of Metroid: Samus Returns spelled the end for Another Metroid 2 Remake, now, in the run-up to Metroid Dread, Nintendo's lawyers have ordered the death of Metroid Prime 2D, another fan-made, pixel-based Metroid PC game.

If Nintendo's concern surrounding fan games is that they serve as unwanted competition, then in this case, the company's fears are entirely justified. Metroid Prime 2D is an astonishingly beautiful fan game. While the completed demo – first made available back in April – is short, it is exquisite, with such a high level of polish in all aspects of its presentation that the casual player could be forgiven for assuming that this was an official Nintendo release.

The premise is simple enough: This is a 2D recreation of Metroid Prime. To make the game work, a certain amount of liberty is taken in game design, as it plays more like Super Metroid than a first-person shooter.

Some effort has been made, though, to maintain the focus on precision shooting that makes the Prime games stand out from the rest of the Metroid series. In true PC FPS fashion, the player takes aim and fires using the mouse, while using the keyboard for movement.

This is fantastic during combat portions of the demo; it's incredibly satisfying to whiz the cursor across the screen, clicking furiously at enemies until they explode. The downside – and the game's only real flaw – is that this comes at a cost to effective movement.

With the right hand busy on the mouse, the left hand has to negotiate the keyboard, tackling both the WASD controls and the space bar jump button at the same time. Perhaps this feels more intuitive for people who spend more time playing PC games, but as a dyed-in-the-wool console controller fan, I simply could not get to grips with this control scheme.

That said, perhaps this could be chalked up to authenticity. Like the real Metroid Prime, this game is at its most awkward and fiddly during platforming sections.

That aside, the short demo is flawless. Screenshots do not do justice to the beauty of seeing its parallax backgrounds in motion, nor to the phenomenal music and ambient sound design. The result is a tense, atmospheric experience that shows just how good 2D Metroid can be when done right.

The difficulty (clumsy controls aside) is also expertly balanced. I never once felt like the game was too easy, but at the same time, I was never in over my head. There were moments when I felt that I had escaped death by the skin of my Power Suit, but the game is not punishingly difficult, and provides enough health pickups to prevent things from ever feeling unfair.

Metroid Prime 2D is a tiny slice of something that could have been glorious – potentially even better than an official Metroid title. It's a true shame that Nintendo has yet again cut down a promising fan game, but with any luck, like Milton Guasti with AM2R before, this team will be able to put their incredible skills to work on something else wonderful. **– MATTHEW L.**

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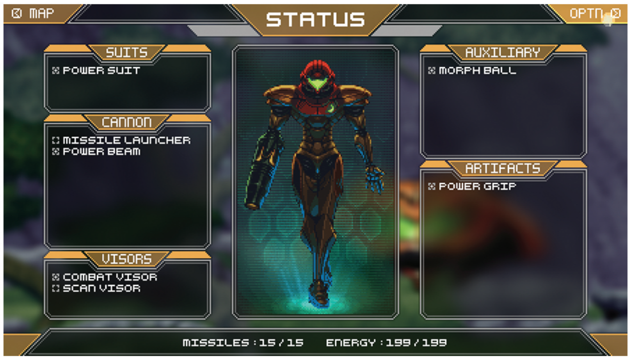
Prime2D.com



BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

Shifting our spotlight from Samus to Sami, the next new Nintendo title to get set in our sights will be **Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp**! The wonderworkers at WayForward are the ones who've accepted the task of bringing this seminal strategy series back from the brink of oblivion, and we'll talk with members of the team that's making it happen. Then we'll review the history of the Advance Wars brand, since it's been inactive for so many years that our youngest readers almost certainly have no familiarity with it!

Like Advance Wars, both **Metroid Dread** and **WarioWare: Get It Together!** have strong ties to the Game Boy Advance hardware, so in addition to reviewing both of those titles, we'll also look back on the GBA itself, to celebrate its 20th anniversary! Pokémon will also earn prominent placement, as **Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl** are sure to be Nintendo's biggest hits in the month of November.

Is that enough advance information for you? We'll see you back here next time!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #56:

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

METROID DREAD

WARIOWARE: GET IT TOGETHER!

NINTENDO SWITCH (OLED MODEL)

POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

ASTRIA ASCENDING

SONIC COLORS: ULTIMATE

CRUIS'N BLAST

DRAGON BALL Z: KAKAROT

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL

20 YEARS WITH THE GAME BOY ADVANCE

THE HISTORY OF ADVANCE WARS

AND MUCH MORE!

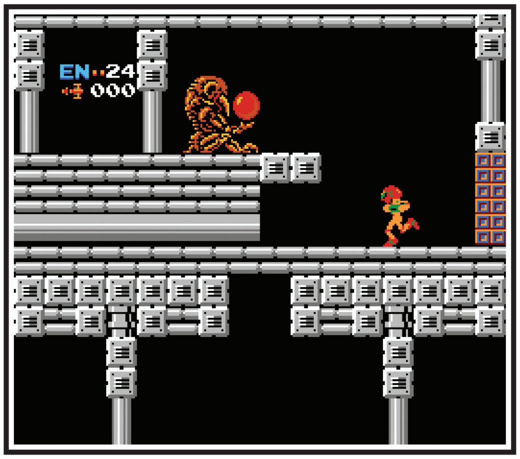
NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2021

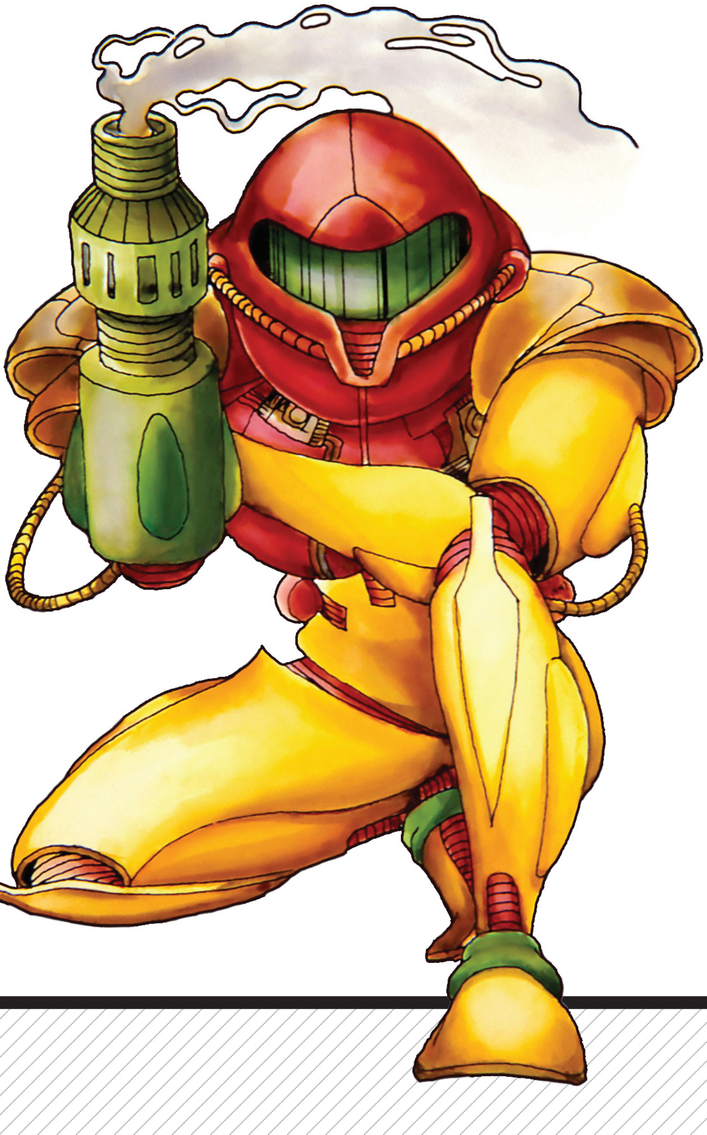
REVISITING HER ROOTS

WITH METROID DREAD just about to drop, many Samus Aran fans have been happily replaying her previous adventures in order to prepare themselves for the new Switch sequel. Or playing them for the first time ever! Whether veterans reliving past experiences or newcomers making all-new memories, though, I'm sure that most players are choosing to kick off their story sequence with 2004's Metroid: Zero Mission rather than the 1987 original Metroid on NES.

Now, granted, Zero Mission has 10 tons more polish than Samus' very first release, and it's exponentially easier to pick up and play today (if you have access to it, of course). But this is me advising you not to ignore the old origin point of the franchise!

Revisiting the first Metroid today is rewarding, as more than 35 years after its launch it's now easier than ever to appreciate just how far the series has come since it started. Go back and play it – run around and get lost in the 8-bit Planet Zebes for a while. Maybe dive all the way into the true '80s experience and spend some time with a few sheets of graph paper, making your own map, as Zoey advised earlier in this issue! Doing so will deepen your enjoyment of Dread for sure. And if you're already a Nintendo Switch Online subscriber, you've got access to it as we speak! Take advantage of that – and let me know if you manage to beat Mother Brain! **— LUCAS**





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